Are you a priest?

An Exploration of the Role of the Lay Pastoral Associate in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States: A Scriptural Perspective

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In a theological reflection upon several years of ministry as a lay pastoral associate the author uses a text of 1 Peter to develop a spirituality for the priesthood of all believers.

A Verbatim Account

It is 1999. In a large suburban church in Pittsburgh, a parish function is being held in the church hall. A parishioner named Joe walks through the door accompanied by a friend.

As I walk up to Joe, I extend a hand to his friend, “Welcome. My name is Cindy.”

“Cindy works here,” Joe chimes in.

“My name is Bill.” The newcomer shakes hands with me. “Are you the secretary?”

“No . . .” I begin to respond, but Joe interrupts again.

“She is our pastoral associate. That means she basically runs the place.” He smiles and winks at me.

“So basically what you are saying is that you are a lady priest?” Bill raises an eyebrow and waits for a reply.

Am I a lady priest?

Cynthia Shadle, a pastoral associate at St. John Fisher Parish in Churchill, Pennsylvania, recently gave birth to her first child.
The answer is no . . . and yes.

My conversation with Joe and the newcomer is interrupted as the pastor walks over toward us. “Excuse me,” he says. “Cindy, there are some people I would like you to meet.”

We walk over to a table of new parishioners. Father introduces me, “This is our assistant pastor.”

Some of the older people seem to observe my age, my long hair, and my wedding ring. They glance quickly up at the church entrance to ensure that they are in a Roman Catholic Church. They look at each other quizically . . . “Is he joking?”

Is he joking?

The answer is yes . . . and no.

One younger woman from the table looks up at me with challenging eyes. She asks, “But don’t you want to be ordained?”

“Instead of responding to the question ‘But don’t you want to be ordained?’ with a yes or no answer, I would respond with a different question: ‘In what is your priesthood manifested and how can you re-form it in order to make it more manifest?’” (Rademacher, 166).

Introduction

From within the pastoral trenches of parish ministry the struggle arises to understand the role of the lay pastoral associate. (Throughout this essay pastoral associate presumes a lay person.) This evolving ministry that includes sharing in such close collaboration with the ministry of the ordained priest surfaces many blessings, and many questions. The growing presence of the pastoral associate in the body of the Church invites a discovery of the meaning and purpose of this new shape in the Church’s ministerial structure.

The publication of Competency Based Certification Standards for Pastoral Associates by the National Association for Lay Ministry, as well as the working definitions put forth by dioceses throughout the United States, reflect a similar definition. A pastoral associate is:

A professional minister who shares with the pastor or the on-site pastoral team in the overall care of the parish. He/she is a member of the parish staff, usually full time, and is accountable to the pastor (National Association for Lay Ministry).

The definition provides a framework for understanding the role of the pastoral associate as a generalist who shares in the comprehensive care of the parish. Although parameters are set forth to define the role, it is not always clear where the ministry of the ordained priest ends and that of the pastoral associate begins. The blurring of the line that results from the collaboration of the pastoral asso-
ciate in such areas as liturgy, faith formation, and pastoral care that not long ago were reserved for the priest, is often at the heart of the struggle regarding the meaning of this new ministry.

The purpose of this essay is to attempt to gain insight into that struggle by exploring the role of the pastoral associate within the context of the holy priesthood described in Scripture. An exegetical analysis and reflection on the priesthood and related themes presented in 1 Peter 2:4-5, and 9 is presented, as a possible scriptural foundation to support and further clarify the role of the pastoral associate.

It is important to unearth some of the wisdom found in 1 Peter as it relates specifically to the evolution of this new role in the living fabric of the Church. This wisdom will help us discover how the priesthood of the pastoral associate is manifested . . . evident (Rademacher, 166).

Exegesis

4 Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and, like living stones, be yourselves built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Pet 2:4-5, 9 NAB).

Come to him

The first words of this passage are “Come to him.” This brief beginning statement encompasses an important truth that will guide not only the passage, but the life of the believer as well. It is of no small significance that “this whole section begins with an invitation: Come to Him” (Senior, 30).

This introduction acts as more than a guide for the actions and intentions of the person seeking the Lord. In their beautiful simplicity, the opening words prescribe the focus and lay the foundation for what ought to surround and underlie the human heart. “Come to him” is not only an invitation for the human person, “but a testimony to the central role of Jesus in the Christian experience” (ibid.) In a passage that will speak of stones and building and spiritual structure, it is a firm first statement in which “Peter outlined the foundational role of Christ in the Christian life” (Lea, 7).

A living stone

The foundation and focus for this passage is Christ, the “living stone.” This unlikely combination of terms is reason for pause, as it is unusual that such an inanimate object as a stone would possess the qualities of a living thing.
The triumph of life over what is normally lifeless is captured in this unique image. Christ himself inaugurated the power of life over what is usually bound to mortality. Thus he is “a living stone, one who in spite of rejection and death has been raised up by God” (Senior, 31).

The living stone is not only alive unto itself. “The word for stone (Gk-lithos) refers to a worked stone, and is not a rock or loose stone lying on the roadside” (Lea, 17). The stone by its nature is fitted for connection to other stones, and its life is made for living relationship to others. Not only a powerful image of the eternal, spiritual, and divine, the stone is “a clear reference to Christ as living, in that Christ is able to enter into vital relationships with human beings” (ibid.).

And, like living stones

This passage moves from the relational potential of Christ in order to address the actual people whose lives will be founded upon him. The people who will join themselves to Christ will be formed by the connection. It is important for individuals to recall that through contact with him, they will be changed. Not only are they to come to the living foundation stone, but “the other stones are to become like the living foundation stone” (Schwank, 35).

It is also important for each individual to recognize that conforming to Christ involves being formed into relationship with the other people who are attached to him. An individual comes to the living stone, and by default comes to the structure of living stones founded upon him. “The Christian is likened to a living stone and the church to a living edifice . . . the Christian finds his [or her] place only when he [or she] is built into that edifice” (Barclay, 195). Already in the passage, there is a broadening of perspective beyond the living foundation and the individual person, to include the community. It would seem that one’s purpose in being founded upon Christ is also inherently connected to the others who have so been chosen, for “to realize his [or her] destiny, the believer must be built into the fabric of the church” (196).

Just as for the individual, this connection will continually shape the body of people structured around Christ. In verse 5 the community itself is labeled “living stones” (Senior, 31). As a whole, the community participates in the process of becoming like the living stone around whom they are formed.

Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house

The process of change and formation that is hinted at by the description of living stones becomes explicit with the word “built.” In the phrase, “be yourselves built up,’ the process of conversion and growth is acknowledged” (32). A person is not merely attached to Christ. The word “build in no way signifies a dead mechanical process” (35). Rather, it is a radical internal and ongoing re-structuring that will transform the life of the believer.
Each person, in coming to Christ and to his Church must be ready to face this restructuring process. “For this they are to be prepared: to let themselves be squared by God and fitted into the frame of the other living stones” (35). Each person must allow that being molded to Christ the living stone will include the sometimes painful process of being worked into the structure of the other stones as well. “Already this letting oneself be built as a stone, letting oneself be tested . . . means a tremendous sacrifice” (36).

The sacrifice of the individual stones, while often to their own spiritual benefit, is given also for the benefit of the larger living building that God is constructing. Their transformation is necessary not only for their own sake, but for the larger structure as well, “as God’s temple can only incorporate building stones which through humility and obedience are suitable” (36). In the end it is the whole that is changed. As God works, fits, sculpts and molds in the fiery process of conversion, his stones are changed and “the building experience transforms the believers into a spiritual house” (Lea, 17).

To be a holy priesthood

The transformation of the living stones into a spiritual house is but one fruit of the ongoing work of building. “The living stones, when they are built into the house, become also the body of priests who minister in the house” (Bigg, 129). The living souls that are constructed, molded and formed together by the hands of God take on a certain identity. “To be a member of the church means to become a priest” (Schwank, 35).

There are many characteristics that define what this body of priests is to be like. They are to be spiritual and moral (Lea, 17). “They are to be custodians and leaders in this living temple” (Senior, 31). They are to be noble, royal and true (Chryssavgis, 373). Above all, the priests are to be holy (Bigg, 129).

From among all of these attributes, and many more, there is one great characteristic of the priesthood that is referred to in verse 5. This characteristic is captured in the Latin word for priest: pontifex, which means, “bridge builder.” “The priest is the [person] who builds a bridge for others to come to God” (Barclay, 196). The feet of the priest may be firmly founded in Christ the living stone. The soul of the priest may be shaped squarely into the walls of the Church. But the priest’s arms are always stretching out to grasp the one who has not known God, and bring that one into the light. “The image endows the human person with the potential of bridging the gulf between uncreated and created, between transcendent and mundane, between immortality and mortality” (Chryssavgis, 375).

To offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ

In addition to being a bridge builder, the other great characteristic of the priesthood in verse 5, according to William Barclay, is sacrifice. The sacrifice of
this priesthood is a spiritual one. The passage states that the sacrifices offered by
the body of priests “are not merely animal and ceremonial. They are to be spirit-
ual and moral” (Lea, 17).

The term “spiritual” in this passage, regarding this priesthood, and referring
to these sacrifices has a very specific meaning. It is the “person” who comes to
the living stone and offers to be built into the structure, and recognizes the role of
the priesthood therein. Thus it is the person’s own self that must be sacrificed.
Christians make an offering of “self” to God, “namely their virtuous life” (Brown,
722). Members of this holy priesthood cannot bring a part or a representation of
their devotion to God. Rather, “spiritual here is that the sacrifices offered to God
come from the totality of the human person . . . and spring from a committed
heart” (Senior, 32). The members of this new and living structure become mem-
bers of a priesthood where the perpetual and most significant offering that they
place into God’s hands is their own life. “In the priesthood of the Christian life, the
entire [person] should as it were, give the [self] as a building stone to the master
builder” (Schwank, 36).

A life offered into God’s hands to be built and shaped must be prepared to ac-
cept what it is shaped for. “Offering sacrifices in God’s new temple does not mean
withdrawal into some sacred zone” (Senior, 32). Offering sacrifices in God’s new
temple means being prepared to become a servant. One who practices the contin-
ual sacrifice of the self to God, who is continually touched and shaped by him,
becomes a sacred thing. A life continually offered to God becomes “a life fully
convinced of its sacredness and fully committed” to the action and the purpose
of God (32).

But you are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,
a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises”
of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

“The final phrase of v. 9 indicates the responsibility” (Lea, 19) which is con-
ferred upon these people of God. The work and the mission of this chosen race,
this royal priesthood, is to proclaim. “1 Peter uses the technical term ‘evangelize’
(literally ‘proclaim the Good News’) (Senior, 37). Proclamation is often thought
of as a verbal announcement, but 1 Peter is consistent in its teaching that Chris-
tians must also “announce God’s wonderful deeds by the holiness of their lives”
(Lea, 19).

In the beginning of the passage, the living stones went through a process of
building to become like the living stone, and to be built into a spiritual house.
Now animated by that life and process, they are to be sent out as a living “procla-
mination.” As individuals and as a whole, “the Christians are to show forth in word
and life, not merely the goodness of God, but his glory, his greatness, and all his
noble attributes, wisdom, justice, strength” (Bigg, 138).
It seems a daunting task that somehow the proclamation of God's most wonderful attributes and deeds are to come through the lives of those close to him. What sort of human lives are these that can so powerfully proclaim the Living God? These are lives that have been deeply caught up in the process of conversion (Senior, 37). These are people who “are there to prove by their lives that God’s powerful intervention in the innermost recesses of the human ego can make saints out of sinners” (Schwank, 40). Proclaiming the Good News is not some “canned propaganda, but a living testimony, because these people have been touched by God and can show the results in their lives” (Senior, 37). The force behind the “proclamation” is the churning work of conversion in each individual soul, and the motion from darkness into light of the Church as a whole. This is the wonderful deed in which willing hearts share: the leading of God’s people out of darkness and into the light.

**Reflection**

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9 contains beautiful imagery and explanation of one’s relationship to God, the Church and the world that could provide spiritual nourishment for any person seeking to deepen and grow in those relationships. It is the purpose of this paper to reflect on how those images clarify in a particular way the meaning of the ministry and role of the pastoral associate. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to address every expected competency of the pastoral associate that is connected to this passage, there is some value in reflecting on the exegetical analysis of the passage in light of the Competency Based Standards for Pastoral Associates. By reflecting on how certain key competencies that form the standard of expected knowledge and skill of the pastoral associate are related to 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9, it becomes more clear that this particular passage can be a helpful support for the role of the pastoral associate in the Roman Catholic Church.

**Come to him, a living stone**

The foundation and focus of the priesthood defined in 1 Peter is Christ the living stone. The foundation and focus of every Christian life is to be the living Lord Jesus. That same foundation, focus and connection is expected to be demonstrated in the life and ministry of the pastoral associate. One of the key theological competencies of the pastoral associate is called “God and the Human Person: Christology” (National Association for Lay Ministry, 320.2). The pastoral associate is expected to understand and appreciate the centrality of Christ through study of doctrine, scripture, faith sharing and faith formation. The commitment to an ongoing process of coming to Christ encompasses an important truth that should guide the life of the pastoral associate. “Sensitivity to one’s ongoing
relationship to God as the source of ministry” (310.25) captures the spirit and centrality of this process that should ground the life of the pastoral associate.

**And, like living stones,**
**let yourselves be built into a spiritual house**

An individual comes to the living stone, and by default comes to the structure of living stones founded upon him. For pastoral associates to come to the living structure that is the Church, it is necessary for them to understand it (Competency 320:3). Ecclesiology stresses the need for pastoral associates to “understand the nature and mission of the church” (320.32) and its magisterial teaching (320.35). The living stones referred to in 1 Peter were to recognize and participate in the conversion of the whole structure into a spiritual house. So, too, pastoral associates must “recognize the significance of ecclesial renewal” (320.33) and retain a “sensitivity to ongoing ecclesial development prompted by the creative and redemptive power of the Holy Spirit” (320.34).

In addition to knowing the nature and mission of the Church, like all other stones, the pastoral associate must be built into it. “For this they are to be prepared: to let themselves be squared by God and fitted into the frame of the other living stones” (Schwank, 35). Part of being squared and fitted is to discover one’s own “shape” and where it fits into the whole. A pastoral associate can engage in the ongoing, dynamic and often transformative process of discovering that “shape” and letting God square it. For the pastoral associate to “identify,” “understand,” “recognize” and “witness to his/her ministerial role” (330.41–330.47) is to participate in the “building” experience that transforms the self and others into the spiritual house of God.

**To be a holy priesthood**

There are many elements of character suggested by the image of priesthood in 1 Peter that are held as a standard to be aspired to by pastoral associates. The Personal Competencies: 310 include many of these. The pastoral associate is to possess integrity (310.14), initiative (310.17), compassion (310.23) and justice (310.23).

However, it is the one great characteristic of the holy priesthood in the scriptural context of 1 Peter that also defines the “priesthood” of the pastoral associate: “The priest is the person who builds bridges for others to come to God” (Barclay, 196).

Competency 320.65, in rather clinical language states the necessity for the pastoral associate to understand how to relate faith to life. The pastoral associate in a particular way says by example, ministry and presence that life relates to faith, and faith relates to life. Despite the overall, comprehensive and diverse nature of pastoral associate ministry, it is the ministry of this holy priesthood, the building of bridges between faith and life, that is unmistakably at the heart of it.
To offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ

The pastoral associate will be knowledgeable of and have a role in worship, liturgy and sacrament (320.5). The pastoral associate may be called upon to “provide creative Spirit filled liturgies, sacramental celebrations and prayer experiences” (320.51). The pastoral associate may “lead” and “preside” when appropriate at communal prayer and worship (320.52).

It is all the more important for a person in such a role to recall that the holy priesthood in God’s new temple is defined by the sacrifice of self to God. More important than one’s role as presider or leader in any liturgical context is the continual sacrifice of the self to God, a self who is touched and shaped by him and thus becomes a sacred thing.

An offering of self as the first and proper spiritual sacrifice should be transparent in the offering of any liturgical or prayerful sacrifice made by a pastoral associate. A life continually offered to God becomes “a life fully convinced of its own sacredness” (Senior, 32) and thus capable of leading others into conversation with God in an authentic and true way.

But you are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises” of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

“Proclamation” of the Good News is the final task committed to the chosen race and royal priesthood of 1 Peter. What sort of life should a pastoral associate lead in order to most deeply manifest this royal priesthood and to powerfully proclaim the living God?

A life of conversion is one that has been called out of darkness into God’s own light. The “recognition of how God is active in one’s life, and the ability to articulate that activity” (310.21) is the work of a pastoral associate who is deeply caught up in the process of personal conversion (Senior, 37). The “sensitivity to ongoing ecclesial developments” (320.31) is the work of a pastoral associate committed to the necessary process of ongoing conversion in the Church.

The force behind the pastoral associate’s “proclamation” of the Good News, whether in liturgy, faith formation, administration or pastoral care, is the churning work of conversion in her or his soul. The pastoral associate’s proclamation of the Good News involves a commitment to participate as a pastoral leader in the motion of the Church as a whole from darkness into light.

Conclusion: Are You a Priest?

The future awaits a more complete answer. A struggle with the question will continue as more lay women and men answer the call to come to the Lord, to
be shaped into the living community of believers and to reach out in this evolving ministry of leadership and pastoral care.

The present finds the pastoral associate as one who can reform and make present a unique manifestation of the priesthood to individuals, church communities and a world that is being called continually to cross the bridge out of darkness and into God’s light.

References


