

Reflection on the Priestly Calling  
In a Troubled Time

The Rev. Dr. Philip Turner  
Nashotah House  
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President Anderson, members of Nashotah's faculty and staff, graduating students, students, friends and honored guests. First I must thank President Anderson for his invitation to speak at this solemn yet joyous occasion. For reasons that will become clear, I hold this invitation to be a particular honor because of the esteem in which I hold this institution. I believe that its *resourcement* of the Benedictine tradition provides exactly the right setting in which to form clergy and church leaders that are actually equipped to meet the challenges of our troubled time. And our times are troubled! The world order America helped put in place after the collapse of the colonial era and after the great depression and two world wars is now itself unraveling. That unraveling is taking many forms, but one of them of particular importance to us (and especially to those now graduating) is the collapse of the social position of the churches, especially the "main line churches", in North America and Europe.

I do not mean to say that the voices of the church are unheard. Clearly many Christian voices are heard in the public square, but the many voices of the churches simply mirror and add to the same sort of bitterness and division one sees in the general populace. That said, this internecine warfare between different Christian groups is not first on my list of things to which our graduates need to give attention. The first thing that calls for our attention is that Western societies are no longer asking the churches to be their religious and moral tutors. This change in social role is one to which we have in no way adequately adjusted. We are still acting as if we had a socially bestowed mandate to form a "Christian nation."

We don't! And I would contend that it is far easier now to say that American Society forms the churches than to say that the churches form American Society. To establish this fact you need look no further than your daily paper and the evening news. The great social issues of our time (let us say birth, death and sex) are being debated in terms dictated by the desires of autonomous individuals in search of personal fulfillment rather than in terms of a divinely established moral order designed to promote human flourishing.

The question I would put to you, the most recent graduates of Nashotah House, is simply this. What does the change in the social location of the churches in North America suggest to you about the focus that ought, as the years unfold, to shape your ministry as priests and ministers of the church? When I graduated from another seminary (some 58 years ago) one question dominated our thoughts—how might we make the Gospel relevant to peoples' lives. So we got ourselves into client centered therapy and social action of a progressive sort. How wrong we were! In our search for relevance we lost the central truths of Christian belief and practice and in so doing simply added to the decline of a Christian presence within the heart of our society.

So what is your focus? Does it help you see clearly or does it blind you to the true circumstance of your time? Today, I would like to share with you what comes into focus

when I look at your time through eyes that learned to see in another one. To put it another way, the focus of priestly ministry I present to you today is my attempt to stand with you as you enter a world I will soon leave. If, in doing so, I can catch a glimpse of your reality and then call it to your mind, I will be grateful to God.

What is the focus God in this time asks that you give to your ministry? What should be its organizing center? I suggest that the focus of all that you do as a priest of the church ought to follow in the steps of St. Benedict, and so serve to glorify God by calling into being, shaping and providing leadership for a community in which Christ is taking form. In short, your pastoral goal ought to be the shaping, health and growth of a school for the service of the Lord. This is a simple statement but a superhuman task. It is simple because its focus is single—a community in which Christ is taking form. It is superhuman because the basic assumptions of our society give little or no support to such an enterprise. As Alan Wolf observes, “When the two (religion and culture) conflict in America, religion yields more to culture than the other way around.” The task may be superhuman but it must be undertaken because everything else you might want to do flows from and depends upon it—whether it be worship, Christian formation, social witness, care of the poor and weak or cultural influence. Nothing of Christian significance will happen apart from communities in which Christ is taking form.

Now we come to the heart of the matter. What does a community in which Christ is taking form require of you? What does it call forth from you? First and foremost such a community asks holiness of life on the part of its priest. I have placed this call first because I believe that successful execution of the many functions and roles that fall to clergy depend upon the imitation of a life. Paul urges us to become imitators of him as he is of Christ. It is certainly the case that people expect their clergy to be good preachers, effective leaders and wise counselors. Nevertheless, behind these responsibilities lies the being or character of the persons carrying them out. If they do not adequately mirror the holiness of life made present to us in Christ, they fail to impress deeply the lives of those committed to their care. Their presence does not bring about changes deep in the soul of the people. Apart from such changes Christ will find it difficult to form a people in which his life is taking form.

Holiness of life comes first, but close behind comes Holy Learning or divine wisdom. Holy learning is joined at the hip of holy living (or as Ephesians terms it, walking as wise rather than as foolish). This observation leads me to say that, given our marginal and embattled cultural position, we need to think of ourselves as Rabbis as well Priests. The Rabbinate preserved the Jewish people through diasporas and pogroms; and the Rabbis did so by ordering community life through faithful living, biblical learning and the keeping of tradition. So we need priests whose lives are ordered by knowledge of Holy Scripture and faithfulness to the traditions of our people. Being wise in Christ is not inborn. It must be communicated and learned. It must be handed over by people who are steeped in holy learning. If this sort of leadership and so wisdom is not present communities in which Christ is taking form will not appear and we will be left, not with the body of Christ, but with seekers who shape congregations to suit their own religious tastes and desires.

Communities in which Christ is taking form also require leadership and authority. Leadership is a very popular word these days, but what sort of person is equipped to lead? Authority is not a very popular word these days but can a community thrive apart

from its wise and skilled exercise? We talk a lot about servant leadership and such speech is right and good. Nevertheless, this common notion of leadership and authority is often deployed in ways that suggest passivity and adaptive behavior rather than the authority that comes from faithfully guarding and guiding the common life of God's people. It is with this authority that the church endows you at ordination and it is on the basis of this authority that you will stand, as the representative of God's people, before the altar of God and lead the praises of God's people. Apart from the presence of authority that furthers the wisdom, the traditions and the life of God's people, congregations in which Christ is taking form will languish and their worship will be lacking in power because of a lack of leadership, authority and communal authenticity. Priests formed in the tradition of St. Benedict, like those formed here, surely understand the importance of authority for the health of the common life of the church, and my prayer is that you can provide this wise guidance to our church. It is sorely needed.

Now I want to look out toward the social environment we actually inhabit. I want to ask how a church in which Christ is taking form is to be present in a time and place when and where the churches are assigned a more and more marginal social place. The church always carries on its mission in a larger social environment. That environment can be vastly different depending on time and place. So how are we, at the end of a Christian era in the West, to be present in this more secular social space?

This is a question of fundamental importance and not just for those who have a passion for "social ministry." Our signature theologian, Richard Hooker, lived in a day when one could pass from the life of the soul, to the life of the home, to the life of the village, to the life of the nation without crossing a major cultural boundary. Hooker sought a Christian Common Wealth in which the Church of England ministered effectively within all dimension of the life of the nation and the lives of its citizens. We do not live in that sort of world though we often act as if we do. It is simply the case that we have as yet failed to provide our clergy and their congregations with an adequate model of how to form and lead a congregation and make its presence respected in the midst of a secular and often hostile social order.

I do not know as yet how to give an adequate answer to this question, but I suspect that, to the extent to which our congregations become communities in which Christ is taking form, they will find themselves becoming a presence that bears witness to a very different form of life than the one lived by most members of our society. Having said this I shutter! Our entire tradition has been one of establishment or quasi establishment. For Episcopalians this self-presentation is shaped by social trends. The image we present has been one that supports enlightened learning, aesthetic sensibility, social grace and moderately progressive social thought. That self-presentation becomes more vacuous by the day. The internecine warfare that now is tearing our society apart is not subject to peace through moderation, good taste and good manners. Neither can its divisions be healed by trimming what we believe and stand for or by ideological victory on the part of either the left or the right. Our social wounds will only be healed when truth meets reconciliation.

Our only way through this mess is to become a community in which Christ is taking form. This sort of community will form citizens as well as saints, and these citizens will have moral and spiritual capacities that make for social health rather than social strife. If you want to catch a glimpse of what such a community might look like I

suggest devoting a year of study and prayer to a deep read of the Epistle to the Ephesians, especially chapter 4. If you do that your world will be turned upside down and you will begin to see what a community in which Christ is taking form actually looks like. You will see what a community that walks as wise rather than foolish really is, and to the extent that vision lodges in your soul you will begin to see the shape and extent of the task God presents to your generation. I believe this vision to be far more challenging and far more important than the one presented to my generation. I believe also that if we listen to what God is telling us through the stripping and marginalization of his church, we will also be given strength to become a community bound as members of a single body to communities in which Christ is taking form throughout the world.

I believe also that if we focus on the formation and care of such a community we will find that God gives us two graces we now lack. One I will call Catholic sensibility and the other Evangelical capacity. First of all, Catholic sensibility! By this phrase I do not mean liturgical form though that concern is certainly an aspect of Catholic sensibility. I mean, rather, something far larger—a sense that the community within which we serve as priests of the church is a vital part of a communion that includes Christians throughout the earth as well as those who now rest in the nearer presence of God. For Americans, this form of sensibility is hard to come by. Ten years in Africa taught me that Americans are notoriously provincial in their view of the world. That narrowness of vision is in part a function of our size, wealth and two large oceans. American denominations mirror this provincial mindset in that our indigenous form of polity is congregational. Episcopalians are in fact Episcopally ordered Congregationalists. Congregationalism is indeed characteristic not only of Protestant bodies but also churches claiming a more catholic identity. Indeed, John Henry Newman wondered if a form of Catholic Christianity would ever be possible within American culture. The individualism of its inhabitants, he observed, works against any sort of Catholic sensibility. The recent actions of our own church have exposed this truth with stark clarity. Our claim to be a Catholic form of Christianity is belied by our exaggerated claims to autonomy. Our problem is that we make claims to catholicity that are not supported by actual practice. If, however, our parishes become what Benedict termed schools for the service of the Lord, we will know ourselves bound to rather than associated with fellow believers throughout the earth; and we will learn, as imitators of the patience of Christ, to wait upon one another with patience, kindness and sympathy, counting others as better than ourselves.

Catholic sensibility, if we were to acquire such a thing, would bring with it another grace we in large measure lack—evangelical capacity. For years our church has thought of its mission in pastoral and social terms. We minister to people who are in some way already Christians and we do good works for the benefit of society as a whole. We eagerly embrace church growth and we seek effective means of providing pastoral care, but we do not do much to recommend the faith within us to those who do not believe. We tend to think of evangelism as leading people who are already Christians from one denomination to another rather than confronting an unbelieving world with the truth about God in Christ in such a way that it compels a response of acceptance or rejection. No one wants to give up on providing pastoral care and no one wants to abandon what we often call the social mission of the church. Nevertheless, in a society in which many religions flourish, in which the “nones” dominate the rising generation and in which many hold Christian belief in contempt, the question of evangelical capacity is

hard to ignore. For members of a community in which Christ is taking form it cannot be ignored. A world that once believed, yet no longer does so, presents to such a body neither a threat nor an object of condemnation. Rather, it presents a world in pain. The small pains we encounter each day expose the pain of the world. In so doing each small pain calls forth from the church, as a truth to be shared, a witness to the relief God has given all of us by Christ's death and resurrection. We worship a God who, in Christ, knelt down and felt the pain. In a community in which Christ is taking form, each small pain evokes in us who follow him evangelical capacity.

Catholic sensibility and evangelical capacity provide an apposite place to conclude this discussion of what ought to be the focus of the ordained leadership of our church in this particular time. If these thoughts have any validity, I hope they can be heard and digested in a community formed by the tradition we trace to St. Benedict. Among the chief virtues he required of his monks is the virtue of stability. To be a community in which Christ is taking form requires stability. I am in favor of long ministries. One does not move from place to place in search of better surroundings. No, one stays put and learns Christ within the crucible of fellow sinners like oneself. I do not mean to imply that on leaving here you find a parish and then stay there until you retire or die. I mean only that you stay the course, that you stick with a vision that draws together all the aspects of what a Priest is called to be and do, that you assume leadership within a community in which Christ is taking form and that in your life you become a model of stability—that is to the best of your ability you finish what you can do in the place you find yourself.

**Well, to wrap this up! The vision I offer you is that you work more to make strong communities than to devise effective policies. And these communities are more likely to flourish on a foundation of biblical learning, than on the deep and no doubt sincere desires which arise within the hearts of those who have grown up in our current culture. And to be faithful stewards of this holy and God given responsibility, may you embrace and practice wise, healthy, and sensitive apostolic authority and leadership.**

**As you pursue this work, may you reclaim our catholic sensibility, and resist the temptation to a superior, and perhaps somewhat self-righteous conviction that all other branches of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church should follow behind on the trail you blaze. And may you hear again the parting command of our Lord to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of God, Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.**

With that in mind I will close with the charge Bishop Dunn of Washington D. C. gave at my ordination to the priesthood in 1961. Looking down from the pulpit of the National Cathedral he paused and said in a rather stern tone, "Gentlemen, (we were all gentlemen then) my final word to you is avoid ambition like the plague. I have lost more priests to ambition than to sexual misconduct or alcohol. If you fall victim to ambition you will be of no use to the Lord." And so I say, do not be ambitious. Be faithful to the calling to which you have been called; and, if you are faithful, I have no doubt that both you and the people among whom you serve will be blessed. Amen