

# Why Ordination Matters

## A Reflection from Jamaica

*Lisa Fullam*

**The author considers the long-term effects of celebrating Sunday worship without a priest in a rural community in Jamaica. The impact of separating pastoral ministry from sacramental celebration is poignantly voiced, along with some of the ramifications of the present policy on ordination to the priesthood.**

“The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.”

“And also with you.”

Another Sunday morning in rural Jamaica, with a congregation that has now gone more than a year without a full-time priest. I am here for the summer, helping around the parish. Today we will sing praise to God who brings us together; we will be fed by the word of God; and we will share the body and blood of the Lord. But since I am a woman, and therefore not ordained, we cannot celebrate Mass here today. In this Communion service I will give the people what I can: assurance that God is on their side and that Christ is present in our assembly and in our proclamation, and, then, the leftovers of Eucharistic bread broken in another celebration.

Some people see the issue of the ordination of women and married men as primarily a first-world issue. They may express the question of ordination as a declaration of the equal human dignity of women and men, or as a matter of the right to equal consideration of all who are called to minister in the Church. Those arguments matter, but they miss the questions at stake for my congregation this morning. How do services like this affect the relationship of ministry to the sacramental life of the Church? What does it mean to be a people who gather for

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the Eucharist when Communion services, rather than Mass, become the norm? What becomes of evangelical effort when the Church is not allowed to provide priests for its people? Not extending ordination to include women and married men sends a message of unconcern for the pastoral needs of third-world Catholics, and the needs of marginalized people in the first world. The question of ordination of women and married men, if we see it from the viewpoint of the third world, becomes a question about what it means to live and pray as Catholics.

***Ministers, but not Priests;  
Ministry, but not Sacraments***

“**T**he gospel of the Lord.”

“Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.”

In this church community, we have plenty of ministers; what we are short of is priests. A sister of St. Joseph is our parish administrator, and skillfully manages the day-to-day operations of our six churches. Another sister helps with programming and religious education, in addition to maintaining the four schools connected to our parish. A gifted lay associate runs prayer groups and leads services regularly. We have a priest who is available for one or two Masses on two Sundays a month for all six churches, and provides other sacraments as he is able. Two deacons are assigned here as well, and we are blessed with a number of lay people who serve the community generously. Several parishioners bring Communion to the sick, others teach children the faith, and others run a weekly meal program for the indigent. The ministries of parishioners are fostered here, and the people respond with great generosity of heart.

The real lack here is not ministry, but the sacraments, especially Eucharist and reconciliation. In predominantly non-Catholic cultures such as Jamaica, the effect is to marginalize the Mass and penance in the faith lives of the people. When ministers cannot celebrate the sacraments, pastoral care is divorced from sacramental practice. The person who counsels you cannot absolve you. The person who prepares you to marry cannot preside at the wedding. The person who cares for you as you lie dying cannot anoint you, and the person who comforts your family at your death cannot preside at your funeral Mass. Sacraments are powerful integrating symbols of grace, true encounters with the Lord. A “supply” priest or deacon can provide the sacraments that mark important transitions in people’s lives, but my congregants go hungry for the “sacraments of sustenance,” the more regular avenues of grace by which Catholics are fed and helped to stay on the right path. After all, once people are baptized into the faith, they have to be nourished in it, just as infants need not only to be brought into the world, but also lovingly raised in it. The Catholic sacramental imagination is

nourished preeminently in the regular practice of these repeatable sacraments, and it is these that become rare when priests are in short supply.

Not being allowed to have Mass together constrains our response to the day's gospel. Jesus speaks of the nature of the kingdom of God being like yeast almost lost in the huge measure of flour, like wheat struggling among thorns, or like a mustard seed in all its insignificance becoming a great tree. In Jamaica I can see the depth of meaning of this gospel: in a land torn by poverty and violence, people are living lives of great faith. They answer the call to transform the world from within with courageous devotion that humbles me. When the people respond with "Praise the Lord!" to this or that phrase in my homily, my heart is full of gratitude for their witness, their challenge to me to see the treasure hidden in the field, to discern the pearl of great price. These are sacramental images; the kingdom is communicated in images that are concrete, specific, and ordinary, like bread and wine.

In response to this gospel, what we should share together is the whole transformative dance of the Mass, the whole prayer by which the capacity of the ordinary elements to bear Christ is revealed to the people through their presence, just as, analogously, the people bear Christ to the community beyond the Church gathered here and speak the presence of Christ to my spirit by their lives. Today I lead the community in prayer and I preach, but we cannot complete the natural sequence of Word and Eucharist. We share communion, truly the body of Christ, but we lose the sense of the presence of the kingdom of God incipient in *this* community, because Eucharist comes to us from some other community gathered previously. This service remains an echo of another celebration; my ministry is hamstrung in its incompleteness.

The liturgical norms of the Church affirm the central role of the Mass: "The celebration of Mass . . . is for the universal and the local Church as well as for each person the center of the whole Christian life" (GIRM I, 1). Services other than this are clearly second-order services: "Sacramental communion received during Mass is the more perfect participation in the eucharistic celebration. The eucharistic sign is expressed more clearly when the faithful receive the body of the Lord from the same sacrifice after the communion of the priest" (Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, 13). John Paul II echoed this in his apostolic exhortation *Dies Domini*, saying that parish communities are encouraged to gather on Sunday "even without a priest, . . . Yet the objective must always remain the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass, the one way in which the Passover of

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the Lord becomes truly present, the only full realization of the Eucharistic assembly. . . ." (no. 53). We agree, but we are cut off from this sacramental center. When I set up the altar before Mass, I lay a stole across one side of the altar to symbolize the connection of this celebration to the priesthood of the Church. The unworn stole is a reminder that we worship in unity with the Church. It also announces that we have been left priestless by decisions of the Church leadership; the unworn stole speaks of both our unity and our abandonment.

A second effect of divorcing pastoral ministry from celebrating the sacraments is more subtle. In a worldwide church, universality is sustained by ensuring some minimal common theological training for clergy. The Council of Trent realized the need for an educated clergy to provide some degree of doctrinal

unity. Why is this important? Most basically, doctrine is the formal expression of a people's encounter with the risen Lord. The task of theology is to reflect, codify, and unify the wisdom of the people of God who have experienced salvation in Jesus Christ. Catholic theology at its best is a beautiful reflection of a particular vision of God, a truth we believe can be communicated to all people by reason of our creation by the same loving God. As Catholics, we emphasize grace while acknowledging sin; we pray with bread and wine perfected by grace into a real encounter with Christ; we affirm reason as well as revelation and tradition; we believe that God's mercy is never ending; we commit ourselves to working in the world to help bring about its transformation; and we look to the day when we all will joyfully celebrate being brought out of darkness into the marvelous light of the kingdom of God.

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The purpose of theological training for clergy is to help them transmit with integrity this Church's vision of salvation in Christ. The minister of the Gospel is not a teacher of dry formulations about God, but, in our tradition, more like the servant who invested his master's money into the business of the world and rejoiced with him over a tenfold return on the original treasure. Theological training for clergy helps to hold us together as a worldwide communion, constituted by a shared vision of God who is alive and active in the world.

But the Church at present makes no distinction between me, with my doctorate in theology, and a new convert just learning the tradition. We are equally non-ordained. The Church has no mechanism by which to distinguish ministerial or

theological competency except by ordination. The effect is that, in priest-deprived regions, anyone can minister. This leads to doctrinal drift and a degree of moral and theological confusion even within parishes, sown by ministers without appropriate training. When the under-educated and the educated speak with equal authorization, the distinctive message of Catholic worship is blurred. The Pentecostal and Seventh Day Adventist churches that flourish here in Jamaica preach a rigid personal morality devoid of any social dimension beyond the need for personal acts of charity; the “Jesus-only” churches among them vociferously deny the Trinity. The Seventh Day churches try to scare our people with the notion that if we do not worship on Saturday, we will be damned. I speak with the authority of a well-trained Catholic, but everybody knows that my Church does not officially sanction my ministry. The diaconate is helpful in this regard: deacons are recognized as having a degree of authority. But they also are not priests, and Catholics here don’t see deacons as speaking for the Church in the way that priests do. In this theological maelstrom, the Catholic Church will not authorize its ministers to speak in its name. By withholding full authorization of its ministers, the Church damages its own ability to speak its message clearly. The result is a doctrinal muddle that fails to provide our people with a cogent vision of Catholic Christianity, and stills the voice of Catholics to Christians of other traditions. Denying priestly ordination to women and married men impairs the evangelical efficacy of the Church in non-Catholic or secular cultures.

In sum, the pastoral effect of the Church’s restrictive ordination policy in the Jamaican context is devastating. Ministry is divorced from sacramental signs, the people are cut off from regular sacramental worship, an ill-prepared ministerial class is fostered, and the evangelical mission of the Church to Catholics and the broader culture is weakened.

### *Is This a Mass or a Communion Service?*

“Lift up your hearts.”

“We lift them up to the Lord.”

“Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.”

“It is right to give God thanks and praise.”

For the second half of the service, I use a Communion service text that is not particularly well-written, but maintains the sung responses of the Mass: the Holy, Holy, Holy, the consecration acclamation (now renamed a thanksgiving,) and the doxology with its great Amen. I am of two minds about this practice. It is true that a text that parallels the Mass risks blurring the distinction between the two forms of celebration. The rubrics take great care not to confuse the two

kinds of liturgy: “Nothing that is proper to the Mass, particularly the presentation of the gifts and the Eucharistic Prayer, is to be inserted into the celebration” (*Directory for Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest*, 35). This morning I have already greeted the congregation with words reminiscent of Paul’s letters, but in a form which is typically spoken only by priests. I began with this greeting merely to effect what the words plainly convey, a formal wish that we might enter into worship under the guidance of God’s grace. I also sit in the presider’s chair, which is forbidden on grounds that I might be confused with a priest, sex and garb notwithstanding. This kind of distinction might make some sense where the presider sits enthroned during the liturgy, but hardly here, where the presider’s chair is a white plastic lawn chair stuck off to one side of the altar. I sit in the

presider’s chair because otherwise I would have to share a chair with a choir member or sit in the congregation. The presider’s chair is the least conspicuous place for me to sit.

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Communion services should not resemble the Mass too closely because of the essential difference in theological meaning between the two types of liturgy. A Communion service necessarily dodges the starkly beautiful present-tense of the words of institution, spoken directly to the gathered people in the name of Christ: “This is my body . . . This is the cup of my blood . . . given for you and for all. . . .” The Mass makes clear what sharing pre-consecrated elements cannot: that the action of Christ in the Last Supper is not an

event limited to the past, or to some other group of people, but is an expression of an on-going encounter with Christ who comes to be with us here and now as we pray. We, however, lose not only the sense of this particular community being called into the presence of Christ, but the knowledge that Christ comes to us in this moment. Sharing pre-consecrated hosts risks a static understanding of Eucharist, and the sacramental sign can be diminished into a mere memorial. We also risk a magical understanding of Eucharist, in which some mysterious change in the elements has taken place out of our sight. In the Mass, the host is raised in the sight of the people as the words of institution are spoken. The change that is effected is not hidden away, but displayed directly before us, calling us to witness to the transparency of nature to grace. A Communion service, because it does not include the words of institution, downplays the startling immediacy of transubstantiation.

The risk of confusing this kind of service with the Mass is real, but too sharp a distinction between this service and a Mass has its own difficulties. Mass is the

norm for Catholic Sunday worship; one obvious effect of offering services that are structured very differently from the Mass is that the people are reminded again that they cannot celebrate Mass. Attendance declines for these “secondary” services, and the prayer life of the community suffers as a result. Second, maintaining parallelism with the Mass helps with catechesis. Mass is celebrated in each of our churches only monthly at best. If the congregational responses are not similar to the other Sundays, catechumens and children have a difficult time learning the pattern of the Mass. Third, a “standard” Communion service goes almost directly from the prayers of the faithful to the Lord’s Prayer before Communion. In the heavily Pentecostal culture where I am now, Communion is a distinctively Catholic practice; using the standard Communion service serves to de-emphasize the Eucharist, and exacerbates the marginalization of sacraments in the life of the community. A prayer shaped more closely like a Eucharistic Prayer allows us to recollect ourselves before receiving, so that Communion will not seem like a liturgical afterthought. Again, the problem rests with ordination policy. If the ministers in this community were ordained, there would be no debates about the structure of the service. We would simply celebrate the Mass with the whole Church, the whole communion of saints across space and time.

### *Now Is the Acceptable Time*

Some say that the priest shortage should not be the impetus for a change in ordination policy; rather, the Church should ordain women and married men, or continue not to, because it is theologically right to do so. This opens the door for endless wrangling about the tradition of priesthood: why the Twelve were all male, whether women can image Christ as perfectly as men (and, if not, whether women can be redeemed by a savior ontologically unlike them). But theological questions are not all of equal significance, and these questions are not the heart of the matter. To allow these arguments to continue to delay any reform of ordination policy betrays a first-world perspective, where people may go church-shopping for better preaching or livelier music, and where Mass is easy to come by.

In Jamaica, as in thousands of other places, the problem is more basic, closer to the Church’s very meaning: the people are denied access to the sacraments. The situation is urgent, and is likely to worsen if current demographic trends continue. In light of this crisis in Catholic sacramental life, church leaders should hear first the foundational commands of the Lord to the Church: “Do this in memory of me” and “Feed my sheep.” As John Paul II wrote: “Because the faithful are obliged to attend Mass unless there is a grave impediment, pastors have the corresponding duty to offer to everyone the real possibility of fulfilling the precept” (49). The dignity of Catholic Christians demands that the Church recognize

the priestly gifts of women and married men so that the faithful may worship the Lord in the way most fitting to people baptized and confirmed in this tradition, instead of restricting them to second-order celebrations.

In the first world the same message of second-class status is often communicated to prisoners, the sick, and the elderly in nursing homes, when ministers offer Communion services because no priest is available to celebrate Mass. The message to these people is clear: the leadership of the Church will not ordain people who could minister to them, and so they are kept from fully celebrating the sacraments. The already-marginalized are thus further cut off from the life of the Church.

In Jamaica this affects our policy regarding burial practices as well. A staunch church member may be buried with a funeral Mass, which requires coordination

with our already-overburdened priest. Other members may be buried by the deacons or lay staff. The Church's refusal to ordain those who could minister to its people results in varying degrees of hurt feelings on the part of the families of the dead. And it is certainly a missed evangelical opportunity to share the solemn beauty of the Mass with the wider community. Burying the dead is a corporal work of mercy, a gesture of Christian hospitality to the grieving survivors, and the very last situation in which the Church should show preferential treatment to some members over others.

So, while some people attempt to cast ordination questions as the fussing of first-world liberals, in fact the issue of ordination of women and married men is far more a concern in the third world and among the marginalized in the first world. They are being denied full participation in the Church, in life, and even in the rituals surrounding death.

It is incorrect to confuse this situation with a decline in vocations to sacramental priesthood. When numbers of priests began to decline, the faithful prayed for priestly vocations, and God, always gracious, responded with loving abundance. Divinity schools and seminaries are full of Catholics willing to devote their lives to the service of God's faithful. They are male and female, some called to celibacy, others not. Many of my classmates from divinity school are now full-time ministers in parishes, college campuses, high schools, and missions. Their ministries are inspired and inspiring, as they face the double challenge of ministering to Catholics without being able to provide the sacraments,

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in an institutional Church that refuses to recognize their ministry fully. The shortage of sacramental ministers does not reflect God's stinginess in calling people to that life, nor any reluctance on the part of those called to respond. The ministers are here, we are capable and willing, and we wait for our pastors, the bishops, to send us forth.

### ***“Did Not Our Hearts Burn Within Us?”***

“**T**he body of Christ.”  
“Amen.”

As I distribute communion in Jamaica, I experience perhaps what the Twelve experienced in their time with Jesus in Galilee. My parishioners come forward and meet the Lord in the sacrament we share, and in the depths of their eyes I see the faith that is the past and future of the Church. I am blessed to stand on this holy ground. I also feel like the disciples traveling to Emmaus who remarked to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us?” I deeply regret the present situation. And still we gather. We are not yet a post-eucharistic Church. After Communion, fortified by this meeting with the risen Christ who is with us always, we cross ourselves and go out to the world in peace, to love and serve the Lord and one another. Thanks be to God.

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