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“Ministry in the Church as a Cruciform Way of Life”

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“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). This remarkable, tensive axiom signifies the central purifying mystery through which those of us who profess to be disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, struggle concretely to live out our fidelity to his mission and to grow in wisdom and grace before God and our human communities. In living out this challenge, we turn to Jesus, whom the epistle to the Hebrews describes as “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who instead of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2).

To follow Jesus is a way of being *in* creation and a way of being *for* all of creation. This following (*die Nachfolge*), this discipleship forms an *ethos*, a way of life—prayer and self-examen, committed service to the poor and oppressed, disciplines of fasting and alms-giving, humility and truth-telling. The summons to follow Jesus leads us out of the shadow of gloom toward great light (Matt 4:16; Isaiah 9: 1-2) and toward a great risk of soul and strength, mind and heart (Matt 6:19-21). Fidelity to Jesus and to the mission that he shares with us finds concrete expression in creative, intelligent, healing acts of solidarity, no matter the cost. “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:39).

The Second Vatican Council clarified this challenge when it reminded us that Roman Catholic Christianity is, above all, a way of following Jesus of Nazareth and of living daily in fidelity to his mission. Most fundamentally, then, the Church was to be oriented toward that mission rather than toward rules and regulations, codes and laws, discipline and order, even if these structuring elements are not without value. The Council sketched out a radical insight about our relationship with God: God would neither be nor could be bound and circumscribed by human law and order. For, to take note of one of the degrees that some of you shall receive in a few minutes—*divinity resists mastery*. God reveals the divine self to us in the dazzling and terrifying parabolic logic of love: The Word enfleshed dwells among us; the Spirit breaks through dead-ends, throws open doors bolted in fear, and stirs up life in dried and desiccated bones. Moreover, the Church was not, nor was it ever intended to be an end in itself— identical with or indistinguishable from the *basileia theou*, the reign of God, or what Jesus and the earliest followers of ‘the way’ called the ‘kingdom of God.’ Rather, the Church was, is, and exists only *for* the mission of Jesus; thus, the Church must submit and commit all that it is and all that it shall be to that mission.

To say that the Church is for the mission of Jesus is to say that *we* are for the mission of Jesus; *we are ekklesia*, the assembly of the baptized. We do not *belong* to the Church, as you know full well, in the way that we hold membership in various organizations or groups: *we are Church*. To say that we are Church is to say that we are *in mission*. Each of us has a particular, distinctive, and necessary role to perform, task to fulfill, and gift to bring to the realization of the

reign of God through Christian ministry in word and worship, teaching and healing, witness and care.<sup>1</sup> We are for mission. In saying this, I do not imply that we are for nothing else, but all else that we cherish may hold only second place to the reign of God. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:37).

To speak of *ministry in the Church* as a *cruciform* way of life is to locate and specify a site wherein we struggle to live up to the challenge of walking (*peripatetic*) with, of following Jesus of Nazareth. You graduates—women and men, ministers lay and ordained, vowed religious, single, and married—are called to be healers of mind and heart and soul; to be a welcome to the outcast, despised, and brokenhearted. You (and many of us here) follow Jesus of Nazareth in this time, this world, this situation—not another. You (and we) struggle to walk with him in the midst of global and national crisis, moral and cultural upheaval, social and ecclesial contention. Famine and hunger, militarism and rage, ignorance and disease deform the world’s peoples, assault our very humanness, and mock our hope. Our greed and acquisitiveness, obtuseness and arrogance have swallowed our deepest desires for joy, for life, for God. We have wandered from ‘the way.’

As ministers—ordained and lay—you must call us back; you must break through our affectation, indifference, and pride. You must tell us truth—about ourselves, about our human situation, about the consequences of our decisions and actions. And, above all—you must tell us the truth of the Gospel. As ministers in the name of Jesus, you must identify, name, and explicate for us the deep ambiguities and contradictions that beset our living, the resistance and fear and hostility that we manifest in the face of change. You must create a “venue” in which we can wait actively and with hope for “God’s newness” to come among us.<sup>2</sup>

You must speak truth to us. You must identify, name, and explicate the crisis in which we live. You must create a venue in which we can live and think and move and act in anticipation of God’s newness. You must do this; and if you do, and *you must*, you will suffer. You will suffer from us; you will suffer from the Church.

You will suffer from a legalism so constrictive, so binding that it will repress, even deny, the passion of God for us.

You will suffer from an orthodoxy so rigid, so defensive that it will stifle, even oppose, the movement of the Spirit on our behalf.

You will suffer from a liberalism so self-indulgent, so pretentious that it will dismiss, even sacrifice, the Gospel in order to refashion divinity in its image.

You will suffer from a practicality so headstrong, so preoccupied that it will discount reflection, even resist, the contemplation that makes action possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Apostolicam Actuositatem, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, “From the fact of their union with Christ the head flows the laymen’s [sic] right and duty to be apostles. Inserted as they are in the Mystical Body of Christ by baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, it is by the Lord himself that they are assigned to the apostolate” [#3].

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 202.

You will suffer, and neither love for God nor love for the Church can diminish your pain; indeed, that very love only increases your anguish.

At some point in your ministry, each of you will be misunderstood and be wounded; at some point, you will misunderstand and wound. Some women and men will heed your advice carefully, others will dismiss it, and others still will treat it recklessly. Some of you will meet obscurity and failure; others of you will run afoul of flattery. Almost all of you will experience monotony at some time in your work.

Some of you will weep at the frustration of a call thwarted by human decision in an all too human Church. Some of you will ache for consolation when Eucharist grows stale. Some of you will encounter children and women and men so broken, so bruised that you will question hope. Some of you will wrestle with God. You will suffer.

You will suffer, but each of you will know love, find friendship and community. Some of you will marry and some of you will have more children.

You will suffer, but you will learn to quiet the hunger for perfection, grow flexible, refine your judgments. You will count yourself happy to see the sun rise in your own country, to marvel at the moon and stars, to cherish the earth.

You will suffer, but always, and all the while, Jesus will be with you—*undoing* your carefully crafted identities of liberationist or conservative, feminist or liberal, orthodox or pragmatic and *conforming* you in mind and heart and spirit and strength to himself.

Do not be afraid: The promises and peace, prayer and presence of Jesus are given to you. Do not be afraid. Hope. Act, love, and work in hope. Pray. Pray. And, again I say, pray. Only a life of prayer can sustain you in this most liminal, most exacting embrace of the human condition that is Christian ministry, which is a cruciform way of life.