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A Public Ministry by All the Baptized?

Patrick R. Keifert
Luther Seminary, pkeifert@luthersem.edu

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PATRICK KEIFERT
Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Any discussion of the ministry of the baptized eventually reaches a point where someone asks, "If all the baptized are ministers, then why and how do we distinguish between the ministry of clergy and laity?" One promising answer begins, "The clergy have a public ministry...."[1] The unspoken half of that answer, seldom said, but powerfully lived out in contemporary capitalistic cultures is, "The laity's ministry is private." This response constricts the scope of the gospel and plays into the contemporary gulf between the public and private dimensions of our lives.

The first half of the response is sound. We should publicly deploy gifts of the Spirit (charisms), offices, and functions within the church.[2] Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, no supporter of authoritarian hierarchy, includes among the charisms the gift of "unity—being responsible for harmony among the many and diverse charisms."[3] Historian and feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether in *Women-Church* supports "designating one person to playa leadership role regularly...to symbolize the unity of the community [and] to join leadership in liturgical and pastoral functions."[4]

The early church taught that charisms were precisely this public deployment; for example, it did not burden the community with the presider's personality but focused on the gift of the Spirit and how it served the mission of the church. Since it recognized the frailty of individuals and their need to participate actively in public worship, the charism of liturgical and pastoral leadership functioned less through personal power and more through ritual. Ritual provided a

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[1]John Reumann, "Ordained Minister and Layman [sic] in Lutheranism," *Eucharist and Ministry: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IV* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 227-82.

[2]Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 193.

[3]Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism & Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 163; hereafter, Charism.

[4]Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 91.

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public structure within which individuals' personality and self-consciousness could recede and their activity focus on God's self-giving presence and the public expression of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.[5]

However, such public deployment of charisms of leadership does not exhaust the church's public ministry even within the boundaries of the church, much less the gospel's claim in other publics as, for example, in popular or academic culture.[6] Limiting the ministry of the laity within the private sphere goes against the essential public character of the gospel.

Such a limitation is especially dangerous now, because it coincides with the general

relegation of God and religion to the private sphere of life and agrees to the great gulf between the public and private dimensions of life. For example, after I had spoken to a large group on the Minnesota Iron Range, a well dressed man walked to the front, insistent on expressing his anger to me. He was particularly upset that I did not think Genesis 1 described the creation in six twenty-four hour days. I asked him what he did for a living. He replied that he had his Ph.D. in geological engineering and worked on the Iron Range. I asked him if he assumed, in his everyday work, that the earth was less than six thousand years old. He answered, "No, that's what I pay you to do."

This man understood the rules of the gulf between the public and the private. He also expected the clergy, especially a theologian, to say publicly what he could only privately hold. It would be easy for both of us—I defensively, he resentfully—to carry out a blame-guilt trip on each other. Both of us, however, had accepted this public/private split and continue to pay a great price.

Part of that price is clericalism and anti-clericalism which feed on one another. Ruether defines clericalism as "the expropriation of ministry, sacramental life, and theological education from the people."[7] Today this expropriation is supported by the gulf between the private and public dimensions of our lives. Publicly, so it seems, only the clergy are ministers. The majority of church members neither perceive nor are helped to develop their public ministry. For many this leads to anti-clericalism. Anti-clericalism resentfully defines the work and mission of the church against clericalism. When anti-clericalism takes on the constructive task, it makes a negative mirror image of clericalism. As a result, for example, it can only see bureaucracy as inherently evil. Where it perceives hierarchical authority it tries to create an intimate community devoid of public structures.

I. THE INTIMATE SOCIETY'S PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS

Historically, neither clericalism nor anti-clericalism provided a positive vision of the whole church's public ministry. Today they thrive in what socio-psychologist Richard Sennett calls the Intimate Society.[8] He explicates how,

[5]L. Boff, *Charism,* 162-63.
[6]David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 3-28.
[7]R. Ruether, *Women-Church,* 87.
[8]Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Random House, 1974).

beginning in European capital cities, the broad forces of capitalism and secularism brought about the psychological conditions which are characteristic of contemporary American culture. He lists four psychological conditions: (1) involuntary disclosure of character; (2) defense through withdrawal; (3) silence; and (4) imposition of public and private imagery. I add (5) the social dynamic of shame. His description clarifies how they deform the public dimension of the church's ministry.

Imagine you are a young person reared in a rural setting encountering a capital city like Paris or London in the first third of the last century. You would be surrounded by people just like yourself, newcomers to the city, a great, undefined company of strangers.

You enter a city with few public signs of social position, like the various masks of dress

and public ritual characteristic of previous urban generations. These public signs had made social interaction possible without first presuming or ascertaining intimate knowledge of the stranger. The signs of the earlier periods are no longer applicable or are signs of privilege and injustice. You, as a young stranger, are left to your own private means. You asked, "How can I understand who I am and who all these strangers are?"

The answer was to wait for the inevitable moment when their true character is revealed by some slip of the tongue or revealing manner of dress. While waiting for that moment, you withdraw to a safe distance. The safe distance is necessary for obvious reasons. If the stranger's character will be involuntarily revealed, then so will yours. If you are to locate yourself among these strangers, you need a place from which you can scientifically observe.

You also need to develop a style of speech and dress which will not reveal who you are. Out of this new urban situation emerged the Victorian manner of dress and speech. Dress became a matter of careful control of individuality. One dressed like everyone else, precisely to avoid exposing one's self, especially one's sexual desires. This left only minute details for the involuntary revelation of character. Although we reject Victorian repressive sexuality, we have not altered the assumptions that made it so powerful. Instead, we assume that our personal character will be involuntarily revealed, for example, through some "Freudian slip."[9]

The assumption of involuntary revelation of self and the strategy of withdrawal connects with the socio-dynamic of shame in contemporary culture. Some scholars in the field of psychology have suggested that we live in a culture of shame.[10] If so, it is not surprising. The common occurrence of shame could explain the initial belief in the involuntary revelation of the self. Once this shaming effect placed the self in the center of consciousness, without accepted social structures for the self to function within, the obsession of self-consciousness could easily follow.

The power of shame in an intimate society is also evident in the third psychological condition: silence. Since in the public space one was acutely sensitive to intimate matters of selfhood and personality, one withdrew to work on

[9]Ibid., 183.
[10]Gershen Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1985).

one's own identity in protective silent privacy. One became a spectator, an isolated figure, even in the public. In silence, watching life go by, a man (the respectable woman did not belong in the public place) was at last free. But free for what? Free to pursue personal identity but not social interchange or mutual activity with strangers. Instead the convention of never speaking to strangers in the public place developed. We began to walk in public space as though we were surrounded by a bubble of privacy.

These psychological conditions are exemplified by the change in the theater during this same period. Since the place of the actor in pre-Victorian society was that of a servant, members of the audience interacted freely with the actor and with one another. As the Victorian era developed, and the social conventions for expressing emotions in public were replaced with these psychological conditions, major changes in the theater took place. The stage was raised. The distance between stage and audience prohibited immediate interaction. The lighting changed. Only the stage was lighted, thus visually removing the audience. The darkness silenced the audience which was already obsessively worried that they might shame themselves by revealing

their personality.

The performer, the only person in the room who was free to express emotion, became more important than the piece being performed. The emphasis moved from the text itself to the performers and their expression of their personality.

It is a short step, and perhaps no step at all, to imagine the Sunday morning worship reproducing this model of public interaction. The service, now shorn of most ritual interaction wherein the personality recedes within the resources of play and convention, is really a performance of one or perhaps a small group. The audience, seated in neat rows, watches the performance.[11] The focus is upon the personality of the performers. As the pastor climbs the stairs into the pulpit, the lights go down; everything becomes hushed silence as the performance begins. The pastor's job, like the artist's, is not to challenge and engage the audience in mutual public activity, but rather to "stimulate" them.

Today's congregation may reject the Victorian high pulpit performance but shares its assumptions. Personality rules over theology and action. Worship is in the hands of those privileged few who can act in public. The rest remain as observers. Steven Simpler, religion editor for *The Arizona Republic,* recently described worship at the "fastest-growing Lutheran church in the Western United States [which] serves as a model for Lutheran congregations nationwide in outreach and ministry." They "dress casually and applaud the choir and choral ensemble's performance." The pastor's sermon is in "an easy listening format." He speaks with a "conversational style of preaching and a winsome personality" that "makes you feel like you've known him all your life." He reads no biblical text as the basis for the day's topic, "How Should I Manage Stress?"[12]

[11]James F. White, *Christian Worship in Transition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 78-85, describes this as "respectability."

[12]Steven Simpler, "Casual format aside, Lutheran congregation sticks close to its own," *The Arizona Republic,* October 4, 1986.

II. IDEOLOGY OF INTIMACY

In the Intimate Society, as in this congregation, the public gathering of worship has the private category of intimacy projected on to it. The result is what sociologist Parker Palmer calls the " ideology of intimacy."[13] The ideology of intimacy accepts the Victorian image of the public place as cold and empty. It tries to overcome it by denying its existence and projecting upon it warm, private imagery. It has three tenets. First, an enduring, profound human relationship of closeness and warmth is the most—or only—valuable experience that life affords. Second, we can achieve such a relationship only through personal effort and will. Third, the point of life is the fullest development of our individual personality which can only take place through such intimate relationships.[14] In Sennett's words, "Warmth is our god."

The problem is not with a commitment to intimacy. The gospel is also intimate. Indeed, the obsession indicates that appropriate sources of intimacy need nurturing. The problem is with the evaluation of all interaction, including public interaction, with the yardstick of intimacy.

The church growth example, perhaps overdrawn, obeys the rules of the ideology of intimacy. The message promises self improvement; the preacher has the appropriate intimate charisma; the community is one big happy family dressed just like at home. Notice the great

difference between charisma in this context and the church's traditional teaching. What was then a public gift is now a private characteristic. If Sennett's and Parker's analysis is accurate, this ideology of intimacy pervades all church life, not just the examples given.

Clearly, some church services appear to meet these standards. Whether such apparent intimacy is truth-in-advertising depends on whether one has the opportunity to relate well with the few public performers. Many clergy operating under this intimate ideology as their mode of operation can testify—or ask their families—that, try as they might, they cannot sustain the illusion. Clergy burnout indicates they are trying.

The majority of the laity are convinced that they are unable to engage in the church's public life, either on Sunday morning or in other public places. If all public activity must involve such public display of personality, then the majority will watch. Their public role as audience on Sunday matches perfectly with a passive silent faith on Monday. However, their promised place in the church's public ministry (liturgy, diaconal work, and witness) remains; their resentment builds. As a result, the gospel is thwarted and clericalism and anti-clericalism are exacerbated.

III. A RE-VISIONING OF PUBLIC LIFE

The gospel's vision differs from the ideology of intimacy. Rather than projecting the private onto the public, it opens the private life to the public, the place of the

[13]Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 120.
[14]Ibid., 46.

stranger. In the gospel's vision, God is often encountered in the stranger,[15] not by erasing the stranger's difference through intimacy but by hospitably appreciating that irreducible difference.[16] This encounter of God through the stranger is mediated through public structures, like rituals and offices, which are not seen as empty of meaning or as cold, sterile places of shame. Interaction with strangers through them is not inherently bad and is potentially very good. They are seen as the place of wisdom and love which is not the same as open, warm, sustained relationships of trust.[17] As Dr. Martin Luther King often quoted, "We are to be as wise as serpents and tenderhearted as doves" (Matt 10:10).

In the public, in ways not experienced in the private life, the triune God creates, redeems, and sanctifies. In the modern period we tend to focus on the redemptive work to the detriment of the others; this abets the ideology of intimacy. In contrast, since God is primarily engaged in creating, not redeeming, we are primarily stewards of creation and only secondarily the objects of God's salvation. Our redemption is precisely critical because it frees us to be a part of God's creative and sanctifying activity in the world, both in its private and public dimensions.[18]

As a result the ministry of the baptized is inherently both private and public. It bridges these two dimensions of our lives. Working from an evangelical vision of the public, we can counteract the ideology of intimacy in each of the three functional areas of public ministry: public worship, diaconal (social) service, and witness.[19]

A. *Public Worship.* Insights from recent liturgical renewal can help public worship bridge the gap between private and public, laity and clergy.[20] The whole community needs ritual competence so that it can participate in, rather than observe, public worship. The goal is gradually to replace the dynamic of one or a few performers and their audience with public ritual

actions. Through these all can publicly express their prayer, praise, and thanksgiving in response to the presence of God.

Given present circumstances, such a ritual renewal requires all the creative resources and charisms the church can muster.[21] Steeping our imaginations in the wisdom of the liturgy we should also attend to its weaknesses such as, for example, its sexism. However formidable this undertaking sounds, anything less abdicates the public ministry of worship and relegates the majority of the

[15]John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

[16]Thomas W. Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 35-63.

[17]P. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers,* 56-70.

[18]Patrick Keifert, "Breaking Down the Wall Between Sunday and Monday," *Academy* 42 (1986) 20-32.

[19]Carl E. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 138-64.

[20]Patrick Keifert, "Modern Dogma and Liturgical Renewal," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 13 (1986) 214-27.

[21]Patrick Keifert, "Truth and Taste on Sunday Morning," *dialog* 25 (1986) 193-200.

ministers to appreciative audience at best and frustrated resentful anti-clerics at worst.[22]

B. *Diaconal Ministry.* The Faith and Order Commission's proposal of a permanent diaconate is an important ingredient in any conversation regarding the public nature of diaconal ministry.[23] Regardless of how that debate comes out, the need for the church to function publicly in diaconal ministry remains. This does not mean the reproduction of social services where they exist in plenty; in such cases it may mean supporting those services by which society as a whole attends to the stranger, those on the margins. This includes political lobby.

The public diaconate includes more than politics. The Intimate Society collapses all public life into the category of politics and imagines no middle ground between private and public life understood as politics. However, a vast area of public life lies between the private and the political. Naturally this public life impinges upon both but cannot be reduced to either. This middle ground includes the great moral, cultural, social, and ethical issues of our day. It should neither be reduced to the private or controlled by the state or political process; it begs the church's attention.[24]

Congregations might sponsor public deliberation. Congregational leaders, other than liturgical presiders, with skills of deliberation could exercise their particular charism. This frees the clergy to express personal opinion without identifying it with the congregation's opinion.

Imagine Christian congregations being thought of as the site of passionate and witty deliberation on issues in which members of the congregation and neighborhood have significant disagreement. Freed by grace, they reason and act together with their community on the most touchy of public issues. They could become contributors to the re-visioning and enlivening of public discussion in American culture.

In this setting those members of the congregation who are most knowledgeable and affected by public issues can meet with their neighbors, no longer under the aegis of political party, but as a third front for public conversation regarding values. This model would not replace the need for Christians in political parties, nor remove the church as an institution from that

conversation. It recognizes the opportunity for another alternative for making public values.[25] All of this can be the work of many baptized ministers who are not clerics.

  C. *Witness and Theological Reflection.* The conversation with the geological engineer dramatizes how we were both the product of a church which reserves mature theological reflection to its clergy and a few lay theologians. The church's theological education, at every level, contributes to this phenomenon. The clergy attempt to retain some semblance of their traditional image as the

  [22]Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). This delightfully insightful book is must reading in this function of public ministry.
  [23]*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,* Faith and Order Paper no. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982); cf. C. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative,* 158-63.
  [24]P. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers,* 71-89.
  [25]The American Catholic Bishops' Conference conceives of the church in this manner according to Archbishop Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, "The Church in the Public Life of the Nation: The American Bishops' Pastoral Letter," *Criterion* 23 (1984) 20-24.

highly educated member of the community. The laity are presumed to be naive in matters of critical theology, and many wish to remain so. The possibility of critical theological reflection by this man, who in many ways is more qualified than I to connect contemporary scientific theory and Christian faith, is slim.

  The expenditure of the church's resources in support of such creative theological work is not nearly adequate to the task. The number of theologians interested and working in this area is quite small. More importantly we could develop think-tanks with scientists who are anxious to integrate their faith with their chosen vocation. My experience over an extended period of time with a study group with membership drawn from the natural sciences at the University of Minnesota and the local theological faculties indicates that such work is painfully difficult.

  The work must proceed from both sides and at several levels. My public high school biology teacher is an excellent example of the potential. Outside class hours he shared, with those willing to pursue the questions, the struggles of keeping God an acting subject of evolution. It is important to realize that apart from this conversation, he was already involved in God's creative work as friend, husband, father, citizen, teacher... However, he went one step further and made a theological witness. He respected the pluralistic setting by making such discussions voluntary and outside class time. He demonstrated his commitment as a teacher and scientist by inviting critical reflection rather than announcing solutions. Had he more public recognition from the church and the opportunity for biblical study appropriate to his education and maturity, his public witness would surely have been enhanced. Be that as it may, no pastor or theologian since has done more for my imagination regarding God and world. He truly used his public office as teacher more than personal charisma and intimacy to bridge the private and public dimensions of our lives. Is this not public ministry?

  These suggestions are sketchy and at once narrow and ambitious. Whatever their independent merits, they suggest strategic directions for bridging the public and private dimensions of the public ministry of the baptized. While not providing a neat division between the ministry of clergy and laity, they suggest limits to the role of clergy and open up vast areas of public ministry for laity.