

COLUMNISTS

Baptism and 'the priesthood of the faithful'

This past week I was part of an accreditation visit at a theological graduate school in the Midwest. The particular school that I visited takes as its mission preparing adult lay women and men for ministry in the Roman Catholic Church. I was part of a visiting team made up of both Catholic and Protestant members. In one especially memorable conversation, our Protestant colleagues inquired about the "new" phenomenon of Catholics educating lay people for a variety of ministries in the church. In the words of one inquirer, "I just sort of expected that schools who have a mission of preparing people for ministry are talking about priests."

As the conversation unfolded, it was not surprising that what I've come to call "the usual factor" was cited as the reason behind the phenomenon of lay people now taking the same ministry degrees that had formerly been granted only to priests. "The usual factor" is, of course, the so-called priest shortage. Thanks to the engaging words and wise teaching of a Canadian priest colleague, however, we moved to a deeper level — and, I think, truer account — of understanding this phenomenon.

What he said was essentially this: Since the Second Vatican Council, much more emphasis has been given to baptism in the Roman Catholic Church. This represents a return to the view of sacraments in the New Testament, where baptism and Eucharist are the premier sacraments. He reminded us that for centuries the sacra-



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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ment of baptism had been overshadowed in Catholicism by stress on the sacrament of Holy Orders and the prominence of the ministerial priesthood.

He pointed out that, in the early church, it was actually baptism that was viewed as initiating each Christian as "another Christ." Eventually, however, this theological perspective gave way to a view and a practice that saw only the ordained priest in this way. The significance of baptism was reduced over the course of several centuries. In fact, the earliest church accounts tell us that the "priesthood of the faithful" had been a prominent notion associated with the sacrament of baptism. It was this sacrament that initiated people into the mission of living the Gospel and serving the church. The view that many of us grew up with, holding that priests were the only ministers of the church and that holy orders was the major sacrament of ministry, had to be put into the broader context of this newly recovered theology of baptism.

With the Second Vatican Council,

then, the church is attempting to return to its own more profound understanding of baptism. What we had come to appreciate as primarily "a cleansing from original sin" is now emphasized as the sacrament which constitutes the Christian community. Baptism is a beginning step in the journey of those who are moved by the Spirit and seek to spend their lives fulfilling the mission of the People of God, the Body of Christ. This sacrament establishes a new relationship between the individual and God that incorporates the individual into the community of believers and into the priesthood of the faithful. All the other Christian sacraments derive their meaning from baptism.

Along with the significance that this theology of baptism has for each of us as individuals who understand that we are all called to take up the mission of the church, is the emergence of a whole host of "new" ministries that make up the life of the church and of our parishes. The emergence of new forms of ministry that we are witnessing in our time is quite like what was happening in New Testament times. We see the church struggling to define ministry in those passages (1 Cor 12:27-31; Eph 4:11-13) that offer "lists" and catalogues of the ministries that New Testament communities seemed to be wrestling with. The Spirit was alive then as the church worked to define what had to be done for the Gospel to be carried forward, and the Spirit seems to be alive today in the same way.

Today we are witnessing all sorts of

ministries in our parishes that did not seem to be named in years past. Just reading a parish bulletin can be an exercise in the new theology of baptism as we note that today our parishes employ youth ministers, human service ministers, parish visitors, deacons, pastoral associates, worship and prayer ministries, music ministers, office managers and bookkeepers, formation and education ministers of all sorts. Schools like the one I visited and the one I work for, St. Bernard's Institute, are necessary to help train people to work in these ways.

They can also help provide a range of programs and courses for those of us who may not be taking up a role as a professional minister of the church, but whose ministry assists in the broader life of the parish as well. At Mass this past Sunday I counted 18 people besides the priest presider who had a role in the liturgy. We are all taking up the call to become "full, conscious and active participants" in the worship of the church and in the witness of the Gospel.

As we move toward the Easter Vigil and focus on the initiation of the candidates and catechumens in our parishes, we might want to take the opportunity to reflect a bit on our own baptisms and the call we receive through baptism to be part of "the priesthood of the faithful" and to take up our own role in the ministry of the church.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.



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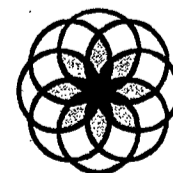
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