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Reduced to being the earth's salt and savor

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | May. 10, 2010

The water of baptism is the birthplace of all Christians, our font of life, and we emerge from it, not lay and ordained, but sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. (CNS/Long Island Catholic/Gregory A. Shemitz)

I was not raised in a linguistically sensitive family. My parents called us ?stupid? when they thought we were. They employed the full range of locally well-known, inaccurate and often hateful words and phrases for people of different skin colors and abilities.

I say this to assure you that I am not squeamish. My mother, nearing 92, can, and does, still tell me I look or am acting like a ?pinheaded idiot,? and the words register in my Texas-toughened brain as a suggestion to take off that outfit, or to stop whatever it is I?m doing.

And yet I cringe every time I hear a bishop or cardinal speak of the penalty, the punishment, the threat of taking a priest found guilty of serious misconduct and ?reducing him to the lay state.?

Reduced to the lay state. Does that mean he is back to being a baptized Christian, a mere member of the body of Christ, a simple human being like those from whom he was born and among whom he was raised -- like those who fed him and clothed him and formed him in faith and taught him to pray?

The words sound suspiciously like ?reduced to the human state,? since lay is what most humans have been and are and always will be. And yet, I thought that was the point of our life all along: to become fully human, as Jesus gloriously was, and as Adam, dreadfully, was not.

In the rite for the blessing of the water, we pray: ?May this water, prepared for the regeneration of humankind, be made fruitful by the secret outpouring of his divine power, so that a heavenly offspring, conceived in holiness and reborn into a new creature, may come forth from the spotless womb of this divine font.?

The water of baptism is our womb, the womb of all who are born anew from its waters. It is the birthplace of all Christians, our font of life, and we emerge from it, not lay and ordained, but sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. We who are raised up out of the water are the new creatures, the heavenly offspring, and it is baptism, not ordination or, for that matter, marriage that calls us to this blessed state. Rather, it is baptism that allows us, as we grow in faith, to serve in the many and varied ways we are called to serve.

Everyone, it seems, has a theory about the problems and pitfalls of a hierarchical church. Some blame secrecy, and others money. Some blame the very nature of a hierarchy, as though it weren?t a natural state into which humans, for better or worse, always sort themselves. Just spend some time on an elementary school playground.

I think a pitfall for the church, overlooked, but real and dangerous, can be found in the language we use when we speak of clerical discipline for the worst sort of offenses. Do we truly understand the lay state, the state of the vast majority of the church, to be a reduction, as though there are classes of baptism, one spacious first class and the other a crowded economy class? If we truly mean it as a punishment to be simply -- or, worse, merely -- one of the baptized, then we have wandered far afield.

There is a way in which this phrase, ?reduced to the lay state,? could be helpful, even transformative. And for this, we need to go to the kitchen.

When cooks reduce, they simmer a stock until much of the liquid has evaporated, concentrating and enhancing the flavor and aroma. The dish is stronger, and more savory, its essence revealed, in the reduction. In *Joy of Cooking*, Irma Rombauer writes of reduction as a way of ?intensifying flavor,? and calls for it to be done ?over a lively heat.?

In another chapter, she writes of reducing a sauce as a way of thickening it, and, so, giving the sauce more body. She ends that section with this bit of culinary-inspired wisdom. ?Almost all reduced sauces, to be perfect in texture, should be strained before serving.?

So maybe being reduced to the lay state is a healthy and salutary thing for men who, like Adam, have left their humanity behind in search of something higher and more powerful, in the quest to become like God.

In James? letter to the church, he writes, ?Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.? If to be healed is to be whole, and if to be whole is to be human -- as God created us -- then let the reduction, for all of us, begin. Let us be strained, that we might be strong and full-bodied. Let us be reduced, that we might be the salt and savor of the earth.

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