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A woman priest reflects on her 10-year anniversary

Jamie Manson | Dec. 7, 2011 Grace on the Margins

This is part two of a two-part series. The first part can be found here[1].

To those who believe that change in the Roman Catholic Church can only come from within the institution, Mary Ramerman would like to offer an invitation view the work and witness of the Spiritus Christi community.

Ramerman believes the parish offers a paradigm of what an inclusive, renewed Catholic parish might look like.

"After my ordination, some people thought I should be a speaker," Ramerman recalls, "and go around speaking about the church reform movement. But the better fit for me was to have a wonderful parish that people could see as a model."

While Ramerman has been working as a priest in her community for the past 10 years, an increasing number of movements to ordain women and build independent Catholic communities have gained momentum.

Some Catholics have pursued ordination through bishops of the Old Catholic tradition, while others have come under the care of the bishops of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. A large segment of the newly ordained have entered ministry formally through the expanding Roman Catholic Womenpriests organization.

Ramerman experiences a deep solidarity with all of these emerging forms of priesthood and church.

"This is still a new movement, so there are going to be all different ways that people find to be ordained. I see us as all together in this, just finding different ways to get through a broken system."

Unlike some in the RCWP movement, however, she no longer feels tied to the Roman Catholic system and does not share the goal of being reintegrated into the institutional church.

As much as Ramerman supports and respects movements to reform the Roman Catholic Church, she worries that some Catholics might become immobilized by their anger and disappointment with the institutional church.

"People are frustrated that liturgy is boring. That's not going to change overnight, so why not create your own liturgy? Or, if you want to continue to go to the same liturgy, then do something meaningful in addition to that."

Ramerman believes that others can learn as much from Spiritus' mistakes as they can from the community's successes. "We're big on experiments here. But at least we're doing something different, rather than continuing to do the same thing that no one is happy with."

Working in a parish setting, encountering those in need every day, has shown her that there is crucial work to be done beyond the reform movement.

"It is important to be inner-centered and focus on what is essential to our spirituality," she said. "It is also important to be outward-centered, and concern ourselves with the homeless, war and the environment."

As for her own participation in outward-centered work, Ramerman feels particularly connected to Spiritus' ministry to Haiti, which began in 1996 with the building of a health clinic in Borgne. Eleven years later, in 2007, they were able to build a hospital in the town.

No one knew then how crucial that facility would be in the wake of Haiti's catastrophic earthquake in 2010.

Since Borgne is on the north coast, it wasn't directly impacted by the disaster. "But people were fleeing Port-au-Prince and heading for our hospital," Ramerman said. "Men and women with serious injuries traveled in the backs of pickup trucks for seven hours to get there.

"Of course, almost all of the supplies were going to Port-au-Prince. So, we decided that our resources would be best spent supporting the north coast."

Once the hospital assessed its needs, Ramerman took the list to Sunday Mass.

"I told the parish, 'I know you're going to laugh when you hear this, but maybe one of you has one of these things.'" They needed a portable X-ray machine, cots, trucks, drivers, pilots with small planes, as well as a warehouse space to sort, store and pack donations.

"We got everything we asked for. It was amazing."

Hundreds have volunteered their time since the earthquake, and a constant stream of Spiritus parishioners continues to visit Haiti. Medical professionals work in the massive open-air shelter set up by construction workers. The past year has been spent battling the cholera epidemic.

While the parish and outreach ministries of Spiritus thrive, their former parish, Corpus Christi, has fallen victim to a shortage of priests and the growing movement to close inner-city churches. The church, which has undergone several name changes, is now clustered with three other parishes. Eventually, three of the four will be permanently shut down.

A few miles away, the Spiritus Christi visioning board, a committee of parishioners charged with charting the parish's future, have begun to consider inviting a new minister who might eventually pastor the community. In typical Spiritus style, they are open to the possibilities.

"The candidate could be already ordained, not ordained or even someone ordained to another tradition," Ramerman said. "The person could also be in our community already and we haven't recognized her or him yet."

While the community contemplates its future leadership, on the occasion of her anniversary, Ramerman is content to reflect on what God has taught her over the past decade. She has boiled it all down to nine lessons, which she shared with the community during her anniversary Mass.

Some lessons have been deeply personal.

"First, I'm not perfect. I fail. I fall down. And I get up again."

She continues, "Fear is created in my own mind and can be dismissed by my own mind. There is nothing to worry about. Everything is OK."

Other lessons concern human connection. "I've learned that relationships are complicated. And a smile means more than a word."

She has also gained new ministerial wisdom: "Children make the best spiritual directors. When I look past the body and see the spirit of the person, I always see God. There is healing for everything."

Her final realization also aptly describes the challenge that the Spiritus Christi presents to many of us.

"We already have the power to change the world. We just don't know it yet."

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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