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Recognizing the church that we already are

Jamie Manson | Nov. 9, 2011 Grace on the Margins

On the evening of Friday, Nov. 4, NCR *columnist Jamie L. Manson offered the opening night keynote address at the annual Call to Action national conference. The theme of the conference was ?Living the Gospel of Love.? Below is the text of her speech.Read more about the address here.[1]*

I want to begin by telling a story because stories, perhaps more than any other element of faith, are vital to sustaining religious communities. Stories pass on insights; they help to give shape to religious traditions; they recall paradigmatic moments or people; they define a community; they are vehicles for revelation; even though they may be ordinary, stories can tell us a lot about the sacred.

This story, I think, does all of those things. It is a true story that happened in a place as ordinary as St. Louis and as recently as 2008. The year that stretched from the summer of 2008 to the summer of 2009 was especially bizarre for the Catholic Church in the United States (and, I know there is a lot of competition for that title).

It was during this time that Father Roy Bourgeois was given his first notification from the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that he had 30 days in which to recant his position in support of women?s ordination or face excommunication.

It was during this time that Sister Louise Akers was banned by the archbishop of Cincinnati from teaching catechetics on behalf of the archdiocese because of her public support of women's ordination in the Catholic church.

Interestingly, it was also during this time that Sister Louise Lears was forced out of all church ministerial roles by Saint Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke. The archbishop also placed Lears under a severe interdict, banishing her receiving any of the Sacraments within in the archdiocese. Her crime? You guessed it. She supported women?s ordination.

It was also during this period that Pope Benedict XVI decided to lift the excommunications of four schismatic bishops who reject the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Neo-conservative Catholics were welcomed back to the table, while those seeking to expand the table?s guest list were sent away hungry.

It was while I served on the board of the women?s ordination conference that I got to hear more about Louise Lears? story in particular. Every now and then, you run into a story so powerful, it shakes you up and then re-shapes your entire theology. This story did just that for me.

On the first Sunday after she was placed under interdict, Louise Lears decided to attend Mass. The experience with Burke left her wounded and isolated. Naturally, she wanted to be with her beloved parish community. She did not plan to receive communion because she did not wish to jeopardize the parish any further. But this was her community and she wanted at least to be physically present with this body of Christ.

Her 85-year old mother was at her side at Mass. When her mother went forward for communion, she told Louise to follow her. Louise did not ask to receive communion, but simply walked by her mother?s side. Louise?s mother took Communion, she broke it, turned around and gave it to her daughter. After witnessing this, Sr. Louise?s sister went and did the same. Seeing what was going on, many other parishioners, one by one, also broke their bread and gave it to Louise.

By the end of communion, Louise?s hands were filled with fragments of the Eucharist. After the Mass was over, as the family was standing in the back, Louise?s mother said to her daughter, ?I was the first person to feed you, and I will feed you now.?

Our stories define us as a community. They recall paradigmatic people. They are vehicles for the sacred.

In that moment, Louise Lears? 85 year-old mother revealed more about the love of God, more about living the Gospel of love, more about what makes a true church, than the entire hierarchy seems to have been able to reveal in quite some time.

And she figured out that secret that the hierarchy doesn?t want any of us to know: lay people have extraordinary sacramental power.

She cut right through this very serious case of magical thinking that our hierarchy seems to suffer from. Psychologists define ?magical thinking? as the belief that one?s thoughts, words, or actions can exert more power or influence over events than one actually has. With their interdicts, and denials of communion and excommunications, the hierarchy seems to believe that they can magically separate the children of God from the table of God. That they can separate whomever they wish from the love of God. That God Godself is subject to their rules.

Though the institutional church may attempt deprive us, the Eucharist, the body of Christ, will always rise out of the people. This is what Louise Lears? mother saw so clearly. This truth grounded her courage. This love poured out of her and inspired all of those around her. In that moment she understood that true presence, true Communion becomes real not by the will of church authorities, but only through the loving will of God. The power belongs to God and God alone. That power emerges whenever we live the Gospel of love.

There is so much I love about that story. But what I take away most is this one particular truth. It took being on the margins for Louise?s mother and her parish family to realize that the power of God was working sacramentally through them. It took being marginalized to recognize the church that they already were, regardless of the hierarchy?s vain attempts to starve Louise of the body of Christ.

I call this experience the grace of living on the margins. I talked about my experience of this grace in the first column that I ever wrote for NCR. (It?s where the title of my column, Grace on the Margins, comes from.)

From the age of 14, I felt called to the priesthood. I was never given an opportunity to formally discern this calling. Diocesan vocations directors yawned at me; the seminarians that I went to college with laughed at what they termed my ?collar envy.? I got my M.Div. anyway -- albeit at a Protestant divinity school.

For whatever reason, it wasn?t until graduation that I realized that an openly lesbian, unapologetically liberal Catholic woman with a M.Div. had somewhat limited career potential.

It would take years to find a Catholic community that would hire me as their pastoral associate. When the chance finally arrived, I was welcomed to the staff of a Jesuit parish in New York City noted for its ministry to the poor as well as the gay and lesbian community.

The parish had an interesting phenomenon that they referred to as ?upstairs church? and ?downstairs church.? Upstairs church was the sanctuary itself, where Mass, confessions, weddings and baptisms took place. Directly below the church was an auditorium where, each Sunday afternoon, more than 900 men and women received a hot meal, clothing, toiletries, sometimes even a massage for bodies weary from sleeping in the streets.

It was one of the most life-giving experiences of my life. But there were also some spirit-breaking realizations.

In upstairs church, though I held the ordination degree and all of the appropriate ministerial experience, I could not baptize the baby or marry the couple because of my God-given gender. Though I did my very best to serve the community, I was never held in the same esteem as my priest colleagues because of my unordained and unordainable body.

But in downstairs church, my gender and sexual orientation never seemed to create barriers. The poor reached out to me, and asked me to pray for them, with them and over them. Their longings were basic and bodily: to be touched and listened to and looked at with love.

They didn?t know my previous education, my background, my sexual orientation, my theology or politics, and none of this seemed to matter anyway. They only saw presence -- my presence. And if I wasn?t being present on a given Sunday, they saw that, too, and boy did they let me know it!

These moments had a raw authenticity that often seemed elusive in upstairs church. I?ve been present at many consecrations of the Eucharist, but most of those rituals pale in comparison to the presence of Christ I saw in the despairing eyes of a homeless man when I put him in a car headed for a long-overdue detox, or in the grateful gasp of a poor couple when I gave them $15 to obtain a copy of their marriage record that will allow them to stay in a shelter together. I?m sure so many of you out here tonight have had even more powerful and vivid experiences of the margins in your own ministries.

I was feeding people, and I, too, was being fed. And I began to realize that this really is all that Jesus asks of us: that with our bodies we become bread for one another. I began to recognize that downstairs church really was an authentic church, too.

Working in a Catholic parish, I was regularly reminded of how marginalized I was as a woman in a church that only respected male authority. I often felt at best underutilized and limited, and at worst oppressed and useless. I?m sure a few of you can relate to this.

And yet, I cannot help but see what a gift it has been to be forced to live on the margins of the institutional church. It?s a paradox, I know, but I?ve met God in more paradoxes than I have houses of worship.

Had I been born male, I would have been immediately been given an engraved ticket to the seminary and ushered into the palace walls and quickly settled into a life of privilege and relative isolation.

Of course, I would undoubtedly have done some ministry on the margins as part of my training. But being excluded from the church?s center of power compelled me to discover the face of God in places I might never have ventured into. If I had not been rejected by the church because of my anatomy, I may have never have had the chance to experience God?s real presence on the edges of our society and our church institution.

Living on the outside pushed me to be creative in seeking the sacred, and kept me wary of the power trips, elitism and self-aggrandizement that I?ve encountered in a number ordained people. Though being excluded will always break my heart, the experience allowed God to break through to me in shattered, lonely spaces.

It was a paradox. But a paradox that allowed me to discover some of the countless ways that God breaks through to us and makes it possible for us to create church among ourselves whenever we live the Gospel of love. I often wonder whether I would I have had this kind of vision without this affliction of being marginalized by the institution.

Now, don?t get me wrong. I firmly believe that God calls us to liberate ourselves and one another from the margins. Throughout the gospels Jesus clearly seeks to free us from suffering and oppression ?- whether the source of this suffering comes from medical, psychological, political, social, cultural or religious forces.

I?m not suggesting that we become a church of masochists. We have more than enough of those!

But I am suggesting that we not forget that the margins are a holy place, too. As we struggle to get to our destinations of inclusion, justice, peace in our church and in our world, we must make sure to see the ways in which we have already created a true church in our life on the margins. The margins of the church can be a place to be embraced. Why? Because very often this is where we often see most clearly the face of God.

What Christian community understood this better than the early church? The first Christians were the most marginalized group of their time. They faced constant persecution from political and religious authorities; they had to celebrate the Eucharist in an underground cemetery to avoid certain death. But they remained committed to creating this church among themselves; sharing meals, sustaining one another through their fears and anxieties; modeling their teacher Jesus by reaching out to those most afflicted in their society. That was church.

The gospel stories sustained them. These narratives reminded them that Jesus, too, was marginalized by the political and religious leaders of his time. These accounts also reminded them that if they wanted to see Jesus? face, all they had to do was reach out to the margins.

The early Christians heard that message throughout the gospels, but they no doubt heard it most clearly in the text of Matthew chapter 25 -? a passage that, even to this day, has sustained millions throughout history: both those who are on margins themselves and those engaged in the work of justice with the marginalized.

Matthew 25: 31-45, as you know, recounts a parable that Jesus tells about the final judgment of the nations. This text, which is only found in Matthew, gives us the criteria by which our lives will be judged. Some of us will inherit, what Ada Maria-Isasi Diaz has rightly re-named, the kin-dom of God. God?s kin-dom, Diaz says, represents ?the kinship of all creation and the promise of a just future.? What an extraordinary thing to inherit.

To those who will inherit this kin-dom, Jesus says (and you all know these words well), ?for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.? Apparently, the righteous were stunned by Jesus? words and wondered when they ever saw him afflicted in this way. He replies, ?Whatever you did for these least of my sisters and brothers, you did for me.?

Jesus, God incarnate, identifies with a group of people who are thirsty, hungry, naked, estranged, sick and in prison. Jesus does not simply say that by attending to these people we bring the presence of God into the world or that performing such deeds are a concrete expression of the mercy of God.

Jesus says explicitly that whatever we do to those who are suffering, we also do to God. This indicates that God experiences full solidarity, in the most radical sense, with those on the margins. Matthew 25 reveals that God has something far greater than a special place for poorest members of society. God actually identifies completely with them. God lives on the margins.

In this chapter, Matthew clearly speaks about those dealing with very physical suffering: hunger, thirst, nakedness, sickness, imprisonment. But, earlier in his version of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew broadened the definition of the afflicted. In addition to considering the poor as those struggling with physical poverty and oppression, Matthew also considers ?the poor in spirit?: those who mourn, the alienated, the lonely, the despairing.

In doing so, Matthew also recognizes the suffering endured by those who show mercy, those who hunger for righteousness and who strive to make peace. They, too, suffer in a world that does not wish to support them in their causes. They, too, suffer at the hands of religious groups who cannot accept their prophetic commitments to justice. (Remind you of anyone?)

We talk so often in the progressive church movement about the vital importance of the preferential option for the poor. How often do we actually consider why it is God prefers the poor and marginalized?

Perhaps the reason that God prefers the poor and the afflicted is because there is no group of human beings that God could better identify with. God prefers the poor and afflicted not because there is any virtue in their suffering, but because God suffers in this world just as they do.

If we understand God to be love, then each time a human denies another love, God is afflicted.

If we understand God to be justice, then each time a human struggle for justice is thwarted, God becomes poor.

If we understand God as peace, then each time peace is broken, God is shattered and distressed.

If we understand God to be healing, joy and wholeness, then whenever and however we disregard God?s presence by committing acts such as degradation, abuse and oppression, God is broken, God is violated, God is alienated.

God is treated the same way that the poor and afflicted are treated. When we are not conscious of their suffering, we are not conscious of God?s presence. When their needs go ignored, so does God?s presence go ignored. They are alienated in the same way God must feel alienated from us--God?s own creation. The suffering, the afflicted, the marginalized are treated the way God is so often treated in this world.

In her masterpiece, Waiting for God, Simone Weil reflects on the afflictions suffered by God. Of Jesus, she writes, ?Christ was afflicted. He died like a common criminal, confused with thieves.?

And she imagines God like a beggar, writing, ?We have the power to consent to receive God or to refuse. If we remain deaf, God comes back again and again like a beggar.?

Weil?s images of God and Christ bear a remarkable vulnerability. Christ is identified with the afflicted and God becomes like a homeless person, begging to dwell in the hearts of human beings.

But how can we understand that God is powerful if God is so afflicted? In this vision of God, God is no less omnipotent and omniscient than God than we have ever imagined. But in a great attempt to be present to us, God immerses Godself in our world, and takes the radical risk of being vulnerable out of a profound love for all of God?s creation. God?s power comes in vulnerability, in being open to being wounded, in taking the risk to love us and to let us know that we are loved.

How different is this notion of power from kind of power that we see on display in our church hierarchy? How often are church leaders guilty of marginalizing God?s presence by denying communion, telling women priests that they are a grave sin against the Eucharist, excommunicating those who dare to speak prophetic truth,

abandoning foster children to the system for fear that they might be adopted by a loving gay or lesbian couple? Just to name a few examples...

We have a God who takes endless risks to be present to us in our joy, sorrow, brokenness, and uncertainty. As church, we are called to emulate this divine act by engaging more deeply with other human beings in the hope that the life of God?joy, hope, healing, love -- can flourish among us. That is how we create church.

But we have a hierarchy that is too afraid of admitting its vulnerability as an ailing and alienating institution. If our church leaders had their minds and hearts centered in this loving act of God, rather than on their own need for power, they would realize that they were truly powerless when it comes to determining who is entitled to be a recipient of God?s presence in this world. They would realize that what they think they are exerting isn?t true power, the power of God, but control, absolutism and authoritarianism.

Is it any wonder that the church is at its best and most fully alive, when we live and work on the margins? It is on the margins we can see most clearly the face of God.

It shouldn?t surprise us then that the church is alive and thriving on the margins. And those margins stretch way outside the walls of the institutional church.

There are countless women and men who are doing the work of justice and compassion, the true work of the church, throughout our world. While the institutional church crumbles under its own weight of faithless, desperate acts of self-preservation, these women and men are modeling the work to which God calls us, by serving in hospitals, prisons, shelters, schools, community centers and anywhere else God seeks to be made present.

These servant leaders are the keys to the future of the church. These women and men can and will guide new generations in understanding what it means to bring about the very life of God in a broken world. This is spiritual leadership that will truly speak to newer generations of people, who are less compelled by parish structures and traditional religious devotions but who are most definitely interesting in committing their lives to working on the margins.

I know countless young adults who are already doing this work with commitment, passion, and sacrifice by laboring in homeless and domestic violence shelters, hospitals and hospices, group homes and addiction recovery centers. They are working abroad in war-torn squalor, and locally in rundown, inner-city basements. They are empowering poor mothers, educating children, aiding undocumented immigrants, planting rooftop gardens in the projects, and feeding the hungry in pantries, soup kitchens, and nursing homes.

So many young people -? who have turned away from the Catholicism -- are honoring the dignity of human life, fighting for justice, and sacrificing to serve the margins of society. By doing this they are, whether consciously or unconsciously, doing the traditional work of the church. But most young people would never even think to call their work ?church.? They would not recognize that by living and working on the margins they are incarnating the sacramental life. They are doing the work mandated by the Gospels, but not many would even know to see it this way. They might even be taken aback is they were told this.

Just because the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. is hemorrhaging members right now, DOESN?T mean that those who walk away have any less of a need for community, for a sense of meaning, for a system of values and beliefs, for spiritual mentors to walk with them through their rites of passage -- birth, marriage, sickness, sorrow and death. Many people have been sent away from the church empty. We cannot wait for the Roman institution to change it ways. We need to feed them. Their voices, their cries are God calling to us from these margins.

Catholics, especially new generations of Catholics, need much more from religious leadership than dispensers

of sacraments. They will need people who are incarnating sacramental life. They need to be inspired by leaders of integrity, they need to have their moral convictions challenged, they need to see how the work of healing, justice-seeking helps us make meaning in an increasingly empty, violent world.

We spend a lot of time and energy worrying, analyzing, writing about, and arguing with the institutional church. But we must not become so preoccupied with the church of our dreams that we fail to notice the flourishing church that we can and do create for one another -- that flourishing church that is so desperately needed by those who are profoundly wounded by the institutional church.

I believe progressive Catholics would do well to take some of the energy behind our righteous anger at the hierarchy, and use that energy to discover the myriad ways that we are already church -? in our work, in our families, in our volunteering, in our communities. We must discover all of the ways in which we bring the very life of God into our world. We must discover all of the ways that we are doing the traditional work of the church, even if it is well outside the walls of the institution.

If in our words and our work we are mirroring the teachings of the Gospel, then together we have created church ?- in our longing for communion, in our searching for the sacred, in our hungering for meaning. It is this ability to see the presence of Jesus not only in the eucharistic table, but also in the table of the world that makes us Catholic. And Catholic sacramental theology teaches us that, if we take seriously Jesus? teaching about the kin-dom of God, it is impossible to tell where the church begins and where it ends -- if it ends at all.

Older generations, who have wept from being barred from church leadership, have an extraordinary and vital opportunity to lead new generations of Catholics by modeling the ways in which we can be church outside of the walls of the institution.

Newer generations, who were raised in an individualistic, post-communal world, would benefit from learning how build communities that will sustain them. Catholic laity, and women religious in particular, could teach new generations about the importance of a spiritual charism and contemplative life for fostering strength and endurance, which is so crucial to working on the margins.

Together we need to explore the ways in which we are already church, and to enhance the opportunities to become more fully church. We need to discover what sacred experiences we are hungering for and what brings us the more abundant life that Jesus taught us to seek. Together we need to recognize that the church we seek is already alive among us whenever and however we live the Gospel of the Love.

We may create smaller, more intimate communities. But what may seem like a marginalized version of church will have profound sacramental power.

Yes we should seek liberation from the margins of the church in the same way that we would seek liberation for others who live under oppressive political, social or cultural forces.

Liberation from the margins of the church takes many forms. For some it means staying in and continuing the fight. For others it means creating visionary church communities outside the walls of the institution. There is no better way, or right way, no weaker way or stronger way. The only criteria is whether this work deepens our love for another, bring about the life of God more fully in our community and helps to attune our vision to see God?s at work in our in our world.

Whatever path we take to liberate ourselves and one another from the margins of the institutional church, we must not overlook the grace of dwelling on the margins. The margins orient us; they keep us accountable. They tell us if we are falling into the world of exclusion and control--that world that only snuffs out the presence of God. The margins remind us where God?s true power lies.

If we should die before we see real justice in the institutional church, we can know that we dwelt in holiness because God was there with us. Because that is were God lives. That is where we see the face of Jesus. That is where we first saw and continue to see our vision of a just and true church.
Because when the hierarchy marginalizes the people of God, the hierarchy marginalizes God, too.

Most importantly, the margins remind us of Jesus? truest and deepest calling: feed one another. They remind us of an lesson so beautifully preserved in the story of Louise Lears?s 85 year old mother: The more church institutions and hierarchies continue to starve us, so much greater is God?s call for us to use our bodies -? our very lives ?- to be bread for one another.

[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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