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Imagine me, a priest

Jocelyn A. Sideco | Feb. 9, 2012 Young Voices

A good friend of mine has found himself at another impasse along his journey where he comes to understand his calling ever more clearly as Father.

I met Brian's fiancée this past summer. As the two of them begin to discern their calling to become family to one another, they have invited me into their sacred process: Brian and Jane asked me to marry them.

Brian was in the process of becoming ordained. After seven years in a religious community and preparing for holy orders, he left when his consolation came to an end. We have walked with one another for more than 10 years and have watched each other deepen in relationship with God and navigate the complexities of life. He routinely confirms and supports my calling, and we imagine a church where we both can be called, he as a married man and me as a woman, and recognized by a community.

Patients at the hospital I work at request daily visits from priests. As initiators of ritual and symbols of the sacred, priests see the most infirmed and bless them with the Sacrament of the Sick. Yet the holiness of the ordinary life of suffering is passed over. The fear of death or of a simple procedure is overlooked as health care professionals spend all of their time pouring into "solving the problem" or "fixing the situation." As a chaplain, I invite people to enter into that vulnerable space where reconciliation with grief, joy, concern, anger and God happens.

Young adults who find themselves active in the church's mission of education and evangelization trust me with their honest awareness of the strengths and weaknesses they bring to their ministry as well as their own longing for a community where they are known and accepted for who they are. In recent retreats, a woman named Shelley told us how appreciative she is of the space we have helped to create. She found herself to be more generous and less defensive in her interactions with others.

Shelley, like the others, was able to be Eucharist, celebrate Eucharist and be sent forth into the world from Eucharist.

I hear the call to be a priest from Brian and Jane, from the patients and the families in the hospital and from the young adults who are restructuring faith and religion for the next generation. My vocation comes from my home parish -- my parents and their friends, my teachers and the wonderful Canossian nuns who cultivated my desire to serve at the table and offer thanks. My vocation comes from the poor and marginalized of our church and world. From those who are sick or dying, alone or rejected, used or violated, or simply are not afforded basic human dignity and the rights that come with that.

Most importantly, my vocation comes from God.

So I explore. I go to a Roman Catholic Mass as well as an Episcopal liturgy -- catholic at its core, universal. I participate where I can trust people's efforts to develop community, even despite all our own shortcomings. Catholics are survivors, and we worship in chapels and churches as well as at the feet of our neighbors. Yet

there is so much polarity amongst us. Our pride has gotten the best of us and stifles the tradition of the church as experienced through the fluidity of the Holy Spirit as understood in John's Gospel.

Church has encouraged me in my faith and cultivated my own calling to ministry. I am disciplined in the rhythm of the call and response, or the relationship explicitly celebrated in our general instruction. Yet the church continues to close its doors on me when I muster up the courage to stand up and say, "Here I am, send me."

This priesthood finds inspiration in the following passage from Isaiah 43:18-19:

> "Do not call to mind the former things,
> Or ponder things of the past.
>
> Behold, I will do something new,
> Now it will spring forth;
> Will you not be aware of it?
> I will even make a roadway in the wilderness,
> Rivers in the desert.

My conscience reminds me to hold fast to the values of human dignity and the prefential option for the poor. I am depressed by the seismic wounds created and sustained by our structures and processes of violence, warfare and abuse. I am enraged by the lack of clarity on same-sex marriage rights and responsibilities. I am frustrated by political big money spending and foul-mouth campaigning.

Living amid all these tensions empowers me to seek anew God's kin-dom. Like the camp song I used to sing, "it only takes a spark to get a fire going." These sparks of anger, sadness and fear are beginnings of a new vision, of rivers in the desert.

Isaiah's inspiration reminds me that our human capacity to imagine is being held hostage. We must reconsider our image of God and let go of all our fears. Through this image, we can begin to clearly see our own image and likeness. When we do this, we will again be able to dream, envision and prophesy this kin-dom that is being birthed each time we accept our own calling and proclaim, "Here I am, send me."

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a founding member of Contemplatives in Action, an urban ministry and retreat experience that began as a response to the needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and now continues as an online ministry offering spirituality resources for those working for justice throughout the world. Visit contemplativesinaction.org [1] for more information.]

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