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## Unexpected Priesthood and its Expectations

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### ABSTRACT

This study offers an example of ‘standing theology’, as distinguished from sitting theology and kneeling theology. The occasion, on 27 June 2021 in St Margaret of Antioch Church, Durham, marked the fiftieth anniversary of the preacher’s ordination to priesthood on 27 June 1971 in Lichfield Cathedral. The sermon was repeated on 18 July 2021 in the Church of St Mary, Wycliffe-on-Tees.

### KEYWORDS

Standing theology;  
preaching; priesthood;  
ordination



I was ordained priest 50 years ago last month, on 27 June 1971 to be precise, in Lichfield Cathedral. This was an unexpected turn of events.

I don’t mean by that that it was entirely an accident: that I just happened to be visiting the building on that particular day – to admire its not very famous spires, perhaps – when a bishop laid hands suddenly on me, by mistake. I mean that even six years earlier, nothing was further from my mind than ordination.

A childhood that involved a great deal of churchgoing had apparently had little effect on me. And all I can recall learning from my regular visits to Sunday school was how to smoke. (Admittedly, this was on the way home; but I was inducted into the practice by the vicar’s son.)

Despite all these experiences, I went to university in 1965 as a fairly convinced atheist. Yet it was only six months later that I offered myself for ordination, to the surprise – if not horror – of my closest friends, my closest parent and, I rather fear, the saintly College chaplain whom I so much admired.

You might think that there must have been some vivid religious experience to account for such a change; but you would be wrong. Although I clearly recall the precise moment and location of my conversion (or re-conversion?) to Christianity, and indeed of my decision to candidate for ordained ministry, the occasions themselves were wholly unspectacular. My decision about ordination, for instance, took place while crossing a road – Ramsgrave Drive in Blackburn, Lancashire, since you ask – the A6119. On one side of this dual carriageway I was still intending to spend my life in scientific research or perhaps teaching; a dozen paces later, I had decided to give all that up. To change to studying theology and to seek a very different future in the Church.

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And although I was a little taken aback by other people's shocked responses to my decision, in all honesty no one was more surprised by it than I was. And still am, sometimes.

OK, I know. This pulpit was not erected in this church as a platform for indulgent autobiography. It was constructed for preaching the Christian gospel. So let's hear a bit less about this preacher and his calling. After all, of all the years since his ordination only three have been spent in full-time ministry (as the most junior curate in a parish with seven clergy), followed by a further four in college chaplaincy (when he was also engaged in teaching). And after that he has mainly been employed in the more leisurely occupations of research and lecturing, with occasional gigs on Sundays when the real clergy were unavailable.

What was it that the late Ben de la Mare, then vicar of St Oswald's Durham, said to me during a conversation in his churchyard back in 1981, soon after I came to live in his parish? 'Excuse my asking, but are you one of those *secret priests*?' He had me sussed. But then there were a lot of them about in Durham, then as now.

But no, I don't believe that there is anything particularly *special* about priests. I certainly do not believe that it is 'higher' than any other vocation. It surely is not higher than the calling we have all responded to, if we confess and call ourselves Christians: the call to be disciples of Jesus, and as such to be ministers ourselves, *servants* – to serve one another and to serve God, and to be channels of the grace and love of Christ. No vocation could be higher than that. And no amount of priesting, and therefore no priest, can take away that calling – or that responsibility – from any one of us.

Please do not think, however, that this is some sort of ultra-Protestant claim, or just a canny way of dealing with church budget deficits by getting the laity to do all the work of the clergy. Over the last 20 years, the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales have been promoting vocation as 'an integral part of the faith journey of every individual' and have now positioned their 'National Office for Vocations' within their Department for Evangelisation and Discipleship. As my friend, the lay Catholic John Sullivan has put it, vocation is 'a mode of discipleship'. 'At its heart', he writes, 'is the belief that God calls one [meaning "everyone"] *through* others *for* others'. It is, therefore, a form of Christian love: a giving of oneself. In Martin Luther's phrase (if you want to hear a real Protestant's voice), it is 'by its nature ... helpful to others'.

And we *all* share that calling. Christian vocation is the response to the call to Christian discipleship. And that call doesn't just come once, say on crossing the road, even for me. It comes daily. It may come from reading or hearing read or remembering, at different moments of our lives, the voice of Jesus. Or it may come in the depths of our own, very specific, human experiences; in the context of our living or of our praying.

Incidentally, I was never concerned that my own vocation could not be tracked back to my hearing a divine summons in a moment of extraordinary religious experience, a literal 'call from beyond'. And that is because I knew that Archbishop Michael Ramsey, no less, had written that 'the signs of the times' should be a sufficient call to ministry; as they are for the rest of our Christian concern and caring.

But why *have* priests, then – if *all* are called and *all* are ministers of Christ? Well, I suppose it is because priests can be useful: in many different ways, but especially perhaps, as *representative* figures.

First, they are visible tokens: symbols of the ministry of the whole Church to the world, ‘the priesthood of all believers’. They are a small part of a much greater whole.

What happens in this service, and in all sacramental worship? We take some pieces of bread and a splash of indifferent wine – ordinary things, created by God and the work of human hands – and we *set them apart* as symbols and channels of God’s *universal* upholding presence and transcendent power. They are representative parts of God’s cosmic grace, of God’s gift of creation. We place on the altar this small part of that much greater whole.

We may think of a priest like that as well, as sacramental: a living sign of all our vocations, all our service. He or she is just one channel, one worn, fragile and often blocked conduit of God’s grace; as we all are. So the priest *represents* our ministry. As a small, frequently unworthy, part of a much greater, though sometimes no more adequate, whole. In that sense, then, the priest *stands for us*.

And in a further sense, also. For the priest leads our worship. Sometimes, then, he or she says the stuff we cannot ourselves say. At the priest’s stall, priest rehearse, albeit now usually in more contemporary language, the ancient prayers of the Christian Church. These are words that we mostly could not write ourselves; words that some may not dare to say themselves. But they are said here, for us, by the priest: the words of the Church across the world and down the ages. ‘We believe ...’ ‘We pray ...’

‘Say one for me’ used to be a common jovial greeting shouted to the priest on his way to church, by a parishioner determinedly walking in the opposite direction. Many a true word is spoken in jest, as the old proverb puts it. I have long ago ceased to be surprised when confirmed atheists have thanked me for praying for them. Well, they could hardly be expected to pray for themselves, could they?

So the priest represents us all – the Church and the world – to God, sometimes at the chancel step close to the congregation, sometimes further away standing before and facing towards God’s altar.

But then the priest must, at last, *turn round*; whether by standing behind or while still positioned in front of that same altar. And at this point the priest represents – and re-presents – *God to us*. For the presiding minister at the eucharist also ‘stands in’ for Christ, who is the true host of this Lord’s supper. And the priest now offers us, in God’s name, God’s holy things, and through them God’s holy grace. Presenting God to God’s people. Feeding us.

There are really only two things for which you need a priest in the Anglican Church: for presiding at holy communion, and for voicing God’s forgiveness in the absolution. For most priests, these roles are not adopted lightly, however it may look. For we know, better even than you do, what poor substitutes we are for the holy Lord and for his anointed. You must forgive us, then, if we falter and stumble sometimes. These are daunting roles to play.

But they are, perhaps, no more daunting than those many other times when we all need to bless one another, feed one another and forgive one another, by deed or word, in our everyday Christian vocations. But look. If *they* can do it up there, all dressed up and smothered in carpets, but with holes in their socks, not to mention a wonky microphone; well, maybe we all can. For God gives God’s grace to all of us, to empower us and to flow through us, as we serve every day as channels of the Transcendent Universal Love.

But we can only do that, and priests can only do that, by being *ourselves*. In all our variety of background and gifts and situations; in all our *diversity*. As St Paul said, ‘if all were a single organ, where would the *body* be?’ (1 Corinthians 12: 19).

We are all called to become a Church; that is, to become the body of Christ. Priests are called to be a small part of that whole Church, that great body. An elbow, perhaps; sometimes, you might think, an ingrowing toenail. It doesn’t matter what. For God calls all his disciples, and all his ministers, *as they are*; with the gifts that they have and don’t have.

And he calls them all to be themselves. Because that is the only way that we can serve him.

So, please forgive my failings and my trespasses, as a priest and as a Christian. And please believe – for your sake, as well as mine – that God can use *anyone* to serve him.

But we must listen out, for when he calls us ...

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

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