

# BEING FULLY IN THE WORLD

By MARGARET BRENNAN

**I**N ALICE WALKER'S rare and lovely Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The color purple*, Shug, a flamboyant blues singer, in a disarming and refreshing way, shares some profound theological insights with Celie, a young black woman:

'People come to Church to share God, not find God . . .', says Shug. 'Here's the thing', she continues, 'God is inside you and inside everyone else. You come into the world with God. But only those who search for God inside will find God . . . and sometimes God is manifested even if you are not looking, or don't know what you are looking for'.<sup>1</sup>

In a homespun way Shug is articulating a definition of ministry, and of the relationships with God, one another, and with the world that are the ultimate meaning of the kingdom that Jesus was sent to proclaim, and that we, empowered by his Spirit, are called to further and enable. At the heart of the ministries serving that saving mission is the enduring belief that all persons are created in God's image and likeness and summoned to a gracious future.

In the thought of Thomas Merton, the divine likeness, though imprisoned under selfishness and sin, has endowed us with an innate capacity for perfect freedom that empowers the ability to love others for their sake and not our own. Through the saving mission of Jesus Christ the divine image in us can once again become a likeness.<sup>2</sup> In Shug's simple theologizing, the image of God in each of us, its manifestation even when we are not looking for it, are expressions of the unseen source of all created beings. Christian ministry seeks to name the unseen source and to make visible the hidden wholeness in all created things. To be engaged in ministry is to enable the divine-human capacity in others to be free and to love unselfishly. It is especially concerned with eliminating those situations and conditions of human suffering and oppression which hinder or make impossible the gracious will of God for a future that is even now full of hope. It has a commitment to care for the earth and to foster the sharing of its goods through responsible stewardship. The formation to such ministry calls for

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a renewed spiritual vision of reality and a way of life (a spirituality) that makes it operative.

In a pre-Vatican II Church the term 'ministry' was not part of the vocabulary that described its mission and for most Roman Catholics the 'minister' was the protestant clergyman with whom he had little familiarity. Priesthood signified and designated both the meaning and office of the Church's salvific life. The focus was clearly defined, the role of the priest clearly understood. He, (and I emphasize *he*), was the divinely ordained representative of Christ empowered to teach, to administer the sacraments of salvation and to lead 'his' flock toward the achieving of their eternal destiny. To this end he was consecrated and set apart, placed over and above the people he served—a father to his children, an infallible moral guide and an indispensable channel of grace. His relationships to them were expressive of this same sense of apartness and otherness.

The ecclesiology of Vatican II was to bring about a major shift in this understanding. While the ordained minister is still set apart in the sense that he alone can confect the sacrament of the Eucharist, he is no longer the sole representative of the saving mission of Jesus. The Vatican II documents describe the Church as a community of people and of faith. All have been called to the same holiness, and all by baptism have been commissioned and empowered to further its mission in a variety of ministries. Moreover, the Church in looking at its own nature, does not identify itself with the kingdom of God but sees its role in enabling the kingdom which is already here but not yet. Rather than imaging itself as the Ark into which others come to find salvation outside of the world's floodtide, it sees itself as rooted in the earth which is present in the images used by Jesus to describe the meaning of the kingdom—leaven, light, salt, the diligent search for a lost coin, a hidden treasure, a pearl of great price. Its mission is not only to insure the eternal salvation of all God's people in a kingdom to come in another world, but to labour to bring it about even now in a world characterized by peace, justice, and the reverencing of each human person. As a community of faith and love, each person in the Church is called and sent to take part in this mission. They are related to each other as brothers and sisters who individually and together possess the Spirit of the Risen Lord and a share in his gifts.

Preparation for the priesthood in the past was grounded in the knowledge of the tenets and truths of the faith that were proposed in clearly defined theses. They offered a corpus of knowledge rich in the tradition of the past and secure enough to answer all the

questions of the present and future. Such a disembodied theology was actualized in a disembodied spirituality where it was detached and separated from the core of personal experience and alienated from nature, from the body and from the feminine which was its symbolic expression. In recent decades the movement to shift the foundation of theology from the proved thesis and arguments of authority to the reflection on human experience as a locus of divine revelation has had profound consequences for the meaning of ministry. It has challenged men and women alike to bring the resources of faith to shed new light on contemporary experience and concerns.

Such a paradigm shift has expanded the narrow confines of ministry and opened the way for a more inclusive designation in naming those who undertake its service in the Church and in the world. The realization that ministry is no longer confined to the sacramental life of the Church, but to the Church as sacrament of the saving mission of Jesus Christ for the life of the world, has called for new models of theological education and ministerial formation. Moreover, such preparation has necessarily included the laity as well as those called to ordained ministry in the Church. The use of the term 'seminaries' to designate such places of formation has changed and they have increasingly come to be known as 'schools of theology'. In the United States and Canada ecumenical consortiums or federations of such schools bring professors and students from differing christian traditions into an exchange of theological views and opinions which enrich one another and offer new alternatives for collaborative ministry beyond confessional lines.

New understandings of the Church and its role in the world have not only affected the concept of ministry but have also significantly shaped the ways in which relationships to God, to one another and to society are experienced and expressed. Theology today is concerned with shaping a vision of reality that brings the truths of faith to bear on the human problems of life. Spirituality is the way in which we internalize that vision in our lives and live it out. Ministry concretizes theology and spirituality in specific areas of service. In a real way, it actualizes the Church.

The purpose of this essay is to offer some reflections on the integration of theology, spirituality and ministry as they are operative in the preparation, on-going formation and life of the minister. Both ordained and lay ministers alike are challenged to enable the formation of the divine-human community which is the mission of the Church. This is a worldly task. It is concerned with the establishing of right relationships among ourselves, to others, to

the world and to ultimate reality. The variety of gifts and callings we have as clerics, men and women, lay and religious need to be integrated in the common vocation we have to shape a social and spiritual vision for a world we have been given to tend. Because the ministry of the Church has been the sole prerogative of the clergy for so many generations, it is they especially who will have to enlarge their horizons. The emerging role of the laity in general, and women in particular, will be sources of new life and not of conflict and tension to the degree that the official Church welcomes their gifts and incorporate their insights.

*The priest in the emerging church*

Nowhere are the effects of the changed understanding of ministry felt more deeply and traumatically than in the ordained priesthood. In the decades that followed the Vatican Council a volume of literature has surfaced which gives striking testimony to the seriousness of the crisis that has affected the lives of priests and altered the meaning of what had been basically unchanged virtually for centuries in the Church's self-understanding. Psychologists and sociologists, theologians and therapists have been enlisted by bishops to do research and to make recommendations. The results have borne fruit in new programmes for priestly formation, opportunities for renewal and continuing education, houses of affirmation, and the birth of organizations such as the Center for Human Development whose highest priority is concerned with a ministry to priests. The fact that the centre now has offices in the U.S.A., England, Canada, and Australia witnesses to the universality of this need. In great part, the focus of these programmes has been to address questions that touch areas of personal identity, relationships, spirituality and the bolstering of self-worth and esteem which can falter in the face of such profound change. More recently, however, a shift to concerns and challenges relating to ministry and to the fostering of relationships that grow out of the common vocation and mutual responsibility of all baptized Christians for furthering the mission of the Church give evidence of a new direction.

In my opinion, however, no ministry suffers from this relational lack more than that of the parish priest. Diminishing personnel from lack of vocations, coupled with an increased rate in retirement, makes any hope of community in rectory life more and more remote. Moreover, even the best attempts to encourage meetings between priests aside from their place of work, important and indispensable as these may be, do not answer the need to form relationships growing out of the ministry itself, since ministry

is the very life and meaning of the priestly vocation. Such relationships today will necessarily include the laity in general and women in particular. Seminary formation in the past, and unfortunately too much yet in the present, has not fostered nor encouraged this kind of interrelating. To the extent that priests were perceived by others or perceived themselves as apart from the people or even from their co-workers, the relationships among and between them tended to be remote at best and patriarchal at worst.

As mentioned earlier, the mission of the Church is essentially about the forming of relationships to God, to oneself, to others and to our world in order to enable the kingdom. It follows that no other area is of such importance as we move into a world which increasingly recognizes the interdependence and inter-relatedness of all living things. Both cultural and theological paradigm shifts have testified to this phenomenon in new directions which can and will transform our lives. In the Vatican Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church defined a new relationship with the world, no longer standing over and against it, but rather immersed within it. While it continues to challenge sinful and evil structures which stand over and against the dignity, freedom and the right of all persons to live in ways which befit their eternal destiny, it nevertheless welcomes and endorses any struggling attempts of secular sciences to bring about a world of justice, peace and human progress. As part of the society it serves, the Church has been and will necessarily continue to be influenced and changed by cultural shifts and new understandings though not without some resistance.

Two such shifts in the area of ministerial relationships that will call for openness, sensitivity and changing patterns of collaboration are the emerging role of the laity in general and of women in particular.

#### *The emerging role of the laity*

In his book *Megatrends*, social forecaster John Naisbitt outlined ten new directions of change sweeping America today. While all of them will affect the Church in a general way, some of them will touch it more essentially, calling for new models of relationships in its structures and in ministries which serve its mission. Trends which move from centralization to decentralization, from representative to participatory democracy, from hierarchies to networking, from institutional help to self-help are already exercising an effect in the Church, the diocese, the parish, the religious community, the school, calling for a greater mutuality and collaboration in ministry. Moreover, as parishes lose their sense of parochialism and reach out in their ministry to a wider world and its concerns,

the role of the parish priest will become more collaborative as that of the laity becomes more inclusive and influential.

A developing theology of the laity has changed significantly in the last fifty years. From the understanding of Catholic Action which saw them as the 'long hand of the ecclesiastical hierarchy', they were seen in the immediate pre-Vatican II years as having their own particular sphere of action in the world. Vatican II's *Decree on the apostolate of lay people* expanded this view declaring that, 'According to their abilities the laity ought to co-operate in all the apostolic and missionary enterprises of their ecclesial family', and should work 'in the parish in close union with their priests' (no 10). Post-Vatican II theology widens the collaboration still further emphasizing the fact that not only are the laity called to work in the Church but that priests are also called upon to work in the world. In his book *The ministry of the Church*, Edward Schillebeeckx states it clearly: 'Every form of being a Christian, in whatever kind of service or function in the Church (either lay or clerical) is a manner of being a Christian in the world'.<sup>3</sup> The 1987 Synod of Bishops on *The mission of the laity in the Church in the world twenty years after the Second Vatican Council* will continue this theological investigation.

Moreover, the new Code of Canon Law substantiates this view. Commenting on this reality, James Provost, a member of the canon law faculty at Catholic University, articulates the challenge in terms of ministerial relationships:

The new Code says the parish is a community of persons. It radically alters the perspective, the mind-set with which we see parish. Parish is viewed as the community of persons, the people of God who are there, who are ministered to by a resident pastor. Their identity does not depend upon the priest; it depends upon the people being a community of faith: that community of disciples who are the parish. This adds incredible ramifications to ministry and our understanding as priests.<sup>4</sup>

The parish priest can hardly be an enabler of this understanding of parish if he still sees himself as over and apart and does not form relationships and friendships that are mutually supportive and collaborative in promoting the kingdom of God here and now. Once more citing the Code, Provost points out that the responsibility of the parish priest for fostering the life of the parish so that it comes alive even in its most hurting members is not an obligation that he must pursue single-handedly. He is to see that this happens by association and collaboration with competent lay

persons who share with him these various responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> However, for this to happen the same sense of mutuality and collaboration, it would seem, must mark the relationships of priests to one another and to their bishops. My experience in this regard is minimal but I have sensed over the years that there is much room for growth in this area. Yet, association with the Center for Human Development has convinced me that such efforts are not lacking. Nevertheless, without meaning to be over-critical, the models for collaboration between priests and bishops that are defined in the new Code still reflect a hierarchical structure that allows for only a limited mutuality. If such modelling carries over into the diocesan and parish councils, one wonders how far-reaching collaboration with the laity can extend.

*The role of women in ministry*

I have suggested that spirituality is the way we internalize and live out the vision of reality that reflection on the truths of our faith articulates in theological formulations. It is how we respond to God in the experiences of life. Ministry actualizes our theology and spirituality.

A spirituality appropriate for ministry in today's world and Church will have to address the questions and struggles of women as they seek a reformulation of church teaching and practice that allows them only a secondary place in the exercise of their gifts. The reformulation I am speaking of goes far deeper than opening the possibility of priesthood to women. It is rooted in our doctrine and naming of God. It is actualized in language that has appropriated male symbols for God and made them the root-metaphor for our understanding. The maleness of God has made a male Church in which the experience of women has been un-named and marginalized.

From a theological point of view, many feminist theologians offer a sharp critique to the patriarchal ideology which placed women in an inferior and subordinate position in the hierarchy of being. They are also critical of classical spirituality which was founded on the platonic imagery of being liberated from embodiment of which woman was the symbol. Men, in order to reach spiritual transcendence, tried to escape from their bodies and from nature. For women, to be holy meant escaping from themselves.<sup>6</sup> For both men and women, it meant escaping from the world. Although such a view is no longer held nor taught, its influence is still felt and experienced by women as they seek to minister equally and in mutuality with men in the Church.

An integrated spirituality that incorporates both the experiences

of men and women as they respond to the summons of God to create a world of justice, harmony and the reverence of every human person will call for efforts at male-female reconciliation in the Church. The strong interventions of church groups all over the world on behalf of the oppressed (including women), will not bear a credible impact if the same injustices are not addressed within its own life and belief system. A hopeful note in this regard was articulated by the Archbishop of Quebec, Louis-Albert Vachon:

In our society and in our Church, man has come to think of himself as the sole possessor of rationality, authority and active initiative, relegating women to the private sector and dependent tasks. Our recognition, as Church, of our own cultural deformation will allow us to overcome the archaic concepts of womanhood which have been inculcated in us for centuries.

The history of our country and our Church has already shown our ability to place proper value on the ingenious creativity and inventive participation of women in collective endeavours. Today women are more and more numerous in all areas of public life. They are experiencing a remarkable qualitative upsurge, indicating a notable change in our way of conceiving humanity. This should encourage us to live out with them, as Church, the relationships of equality demanded by our fundamental identity as persons and our life as sons and daughters of God.<sup>7</sup>

On a day-to-day basis, where men and women minister together in the parish, the school, on diocesan commissions and so on, there will be need to engage in dialogue where mutual exchange can bring the variety of gifts to bear on the common mission which we share and to which we have committed our lives. In this way our dichotomies can be overcome and the hope for an integrated spirituality for ministry can have moved forward in at least one important segment of the Church's life.

#### *Education for ministry*

For such dialogue to be free and non-threatening, an openness to receiving new insights is a *sine qua non*. On-going education, in order to keep abreast of theological developments and changing cultural paradigms which affect the practice of ministry today, is no longer a luxury. It expands and challenges stubbornly held presuppositions. It opens the way to new experiences of the Spirit's creative prompting 'to do a new thing . . . to create a path in the wilderness' (Isai 43,19).



A hopeful look to the future resides in ministerial schools of formation as fruitful seed-beds for nourishing the growth of a contemporary theological vision that prepares both men and women for being fully in the world. This is especially true when faculties of such learning centres are mindful of the ministerial situations in which their students will serve, and of the challenges they will meet. The incorporation of field education and theological reflection seminars into the curriculum provides an opportunity to bring the christian tradition to bear on the human problems of life. More importantly, it challenges the students to form and to articulate their own operative theology. This articulation, hopefully, will be the expression of their spirituality.

### *Conclusion*

I believe, finally, that all theology, ministry and spirituality is about relationships. Ministerial relationships, like all others, will admit of many degrees and kinds. As human beings all of us need relationships with others. We need their love and support physically, emotionally and intellectually. As Christians, we believe that all of them will be founded on that which unites us in our faith—the love of God. Yet we also know that the transforming presence of God's love is what we discover, experience, offer and receive from one another. In the words of Thomas Merton:

It is the love of my lover, my brother or my child that sees God in me . . . and it is my love for my lover, my child, my sister that enables me to show God to him or her in himself or herself . . . Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, this passage indicates to me that love has both a grandeur and a terror—and that relationships are plain prose as well as poetry. C. S. Lewis, in *The four loves*, reflects on this reality. Commenting on the love of charity he notes, as all of us have experienced, that to love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and our hearts will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken:

If you want to make sure of keeping your heart intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable . . . the only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell.<sup>9</sup>

But we have also learned that hearts can heal and be made whole again . . . especially if we allow God to turn our natural loves into charity. And, says Lewis, 'The invitation to turn our natural loves into charity is never lacking . . . It is provided by those frictions and frustrations that meet us all. In everyone—and of course, in ourselves—there is that which requires forbearance, forgiveness, tolerance and tenderness'—perhaps, paradoxically, harder to receive than to give.<sup>10</sup> And in our deep and natural love for another that which is eternal and perduring is the transforming presence of God's love which is the meaning of charity. Such charity is surely not meant to belittle our natural love but to indicate where its true glory lies.

In conclusion I would like to return to Shug in *The color purple* where I began. 'God is inside you and inside everyone else', says Shug. 'You come into the world with God . . . and sometimes God is manifested even if you are not looking, or don't know what you are looking for'. If Shug is right then the first and most fundamental rule of ministry and the ability to live fully in the wider world is to develop the ability to discover God in all the relationships of life and to be alert and ready for that manifestation even when we are not looking—or knowing what we are looking for.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Walker, Alice: *The color purple* (Washington Square Press, 1982), p 177.

<sup>2</sup> Higgins, John J: *Merton's theology of prayer* (Cistercian Publications, Spencer, Massachusetts, 1971), pp 8–10, 12.

<sup>3</sup> pp 129–130. For an expansion of these developments, see the article of Margaret Hebblethwaite in *The Tablet*, (June, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Provost, James: 'Justice in the Church', *Newsletter: continuing education for clergy*, 1983, p 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 48.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion on the crisis of spirituality and the feminine symbol see J. Holland, *The spiritual crisis of modern culture* (Centre of Concern, Washington, D.C., 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Intervention of Most Reverend Louis-Albert Vachon, Archbishop of Quebec and Primate of Canada, Synod of bishops, October 3, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, 'As man to man', *Cistercian studies*, IV (1969), pp 93–94.

<sup>9</sup> *The four loves*, (A Harvest/HBJ Book, Harcourt Brace Javanovich, Publishers, 1960), p 169.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p 186.