

# A Theology of Mutual Ministry

Diocese of Northern Michigan

## Beginning With Relationships

When we are asked to close our eyes and picture God what we often see is an image of God as Father, as Mother, as Spirit, as Christ. We picture something or someone that is singular or one. Much as when we imagine and draw a blade of grass or a deer. We have learned to treasure uniqueness and individuality and in turn have become accustomed to fashioning a God in keeping with our own preferences.

Jesus, as a faithful Jew, would have begun his day with the opening words of the Shema, *Here O Israel, God, our God, is one*. And so *oneness* is indeed an integral part of our Jewish and Christian heritages. However, as Christians in the West who are accustomed to beginning with one, we then find ourselves struggling to explain how the One can be Three. We tend to approach the mystery of the Trinity as a logical puzzle, which we try to solve deductively, beginning with the One. More often than not we set the puzzle aside in frustration as irrelevant.

As we listen intently to the voices of science today, however, we hear described a picture of creation in which parts are always integrated dimensions of larger wholes. Atoms rest in molecules, which rest in cells, which rest in organs, which rest in animals, which rest in communities. Science describes a creation in which all creatures are related and interconnected in a web of life – each whole is a part nesting within a larger whole. It is only within our whole relationships that we live, move, and have being. No creature is ever simply singular.

The relational and nesting character of all creation reveals a communitarian approach to God, reflective of the Trinity. A creation of interwoven lives leads us to affirm that relationship, partnership, and mutuality, lie at the heart of being creatures of God. When we follow this communitarian path to God, it transforms our relationship with creation. We discover that to be a people sent, is to be a people whose mission is characterized by listening, learning, and then leading. These gospel virtues flow from a recognition and respect of the trinitarian presence in all that is. The Trinity is not only how God is, it is how we, created in God's image, rest in and come to God. God is community and so are we. A theology of mutual ministry asks us not to begin with a singular one, but with a oneness birthed through the union of mutual love.

Let us begin then with the Three, when we talk of God, and ask ourselves, *how is it that the Three are One?* We are not questioning whether God is One, but *how* God is One. Which raises the question, how are we, God's creatures created in the image of God, one? What is it that unites us with one another, forming various individuals into a community?

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century Andrei Rublev painted *The Old Testament Trinity*, an icon of God which has become quite famous. As you gaze into the icon, you are drawn to an open place about a low table, around which sit three relaxed figures. Upon the table sits a cup easily reached by any of the three. Each figure rests peacefully and at ease in the presence of the other two.

With heads inclined gently, yet deliberately, toward one another, there is a distinct air of mutual regard. A desire to drink in the presence of the others permeates the icon. These are figures ready to receive what the other has to give. Around this table each is utterly aware of the presence of the other, and each listens to the other with inclined ear and ready heart. One table, one cup, one mutual desire to listen to the other – born of eternal loving recognition of the holy present in all. Competition is as wholly absent as compassion is utterly present. Domination dissolves into equality. These three are one: one in open heart, one in listening mind, one in mutual love.

Rublev's icon is a vision for community life (an ecclesiology) as well as an understanding of divine life (a theology). Mutual ministry begins with the inclined ear and open heart ready to receive in love the holy which is the other. Mutual ministry endeavors to embody in community life the same mutual respect eternally present in the life of God. The Trinity is a symbolic way of affirming the hope expressed in John's gospel that *all may be one, as you, Abba, are in me and I in you* (17.21) This is in no sense an exclusive oneness. Whenever and wherever we accept the Spirit's invitation to live into the river of love which sustains all creation, we dwell in one another. There is no love not of God, and so there is no unity born of love not of God.

The open and embracing character of trinitarian love in the icon is revealed also through the warm space between the two figures in the icon's foreground. Here there is forever a place at the table for another within the life of God. In a sense, God draws back to make space and then embraces. All of which might be a description of how God relates to creation. Drawing upon the ancient Jewish doctrine of the Shekinah, we can think of the creation of the universe as involving a withdrawal of God to make space for creatures. God makes space for the emergence of a universe and for the evolution of life and then embraces it. Elizabeth Johnson draws comparison here with the pregnant mother: *To be so structured that you have room inside yourself for another to dwell is quintessentially a female experience. Every human being has lived and moved and had their being inside a woman, for the better part of the year it took them to be knit together.* Denis Edwards says he finds *this experience of a mother making space in the womb for another a wonderfully rich and evocative image for the divine generativity by which the universe is brought forth within God.*

The Johannine gospel declares that love is the Spirit which weaves our seemingly separate lives into a common fabric of community. Love draws a couple together to unite in partnership and family – united around birth and death, meal and story. These concrete and mundane activities are the very flesh of divine love lived. And love lived is Spirit weaving wholeness and communion. If we attend closely to how it is we not only survive but thrive, such wholeness is never realized in isolation but in community. Even if we are alone, our hearts are ever inhabited by others – they dwell in our memories, our stories, our hopes and sorrows, and we abide also in them. To live is to dwell in others as they dwell in us. How we dwell, well that is the question. God bids us dwell in love. For God is love, and we who abide in love abide in God and God in us.

As human beings, as God's own, we feel ceaselessly drawn into community. Human history may be studied as more or less successful attempts to live into this call. The call is the voice, the nudging, of the Spirit who flows through and sustains all creation. The call is of God. We might go so far as to say that the call is God. Because to be God is to live in communion and to ceaselessly invite all creation to join in this communion of life. Trinity is not only God's life, it is our mission. The Spirit invites us to share the redeeming story that we are healed from our brokenness as we learn to live into communities (family, school, workplace, church, etc.) of mutual love which nurture our gifts. The co-creation of such communities is our mission because only this way of existence holds the promise of life.

### Baptized into mission through ministry

In baptism, we accept that we have always been of God. Baptism represents our basic and unsurpassable response to God's invitation to life. Baptism is never abstract, but always embodied in a particular life, formed in the way of Christ, inspired by the Spirit. In this most basic sense, baptism is understood to shape one's life, forming one as a Christian. Baptism is a sacrament that brings order or reorders to our lives: we realize that all of creation is our kin. All are born of the one God, and kinfolk in the kingdom of God.

Baptism helps a parent shape or order her life consistent with her understanding of the kingdom of God. To be baptized is to have one's way of life reformed such that it is now lived, in all its concreteness, to further the kingdom. Each and every life represents a specific current within the common baptismal waters. There is no water without the currents, just as there are no currents without the water. The currents give shape, texture, or order, to the water, so that it is discernible and perceptible. Such is also the case with particular lives of the baptized lived in faith – they reveal, give witness to, the presence of Christ, of Spirit, within Creation.

When we understand baptism as a sacrament which reforms or reorders our lives, then we begin to perceive the traditional threefold order (of deacon, presbyter and bishop) as in no way set apart from this flow (for without the water there are no currents). These three orders are ministerial archetypes whose distinct shape or order reveals with fuller clarity the order already expressed in the life of the baptized.

The church is then the baptized and there is no such discrete and separate entity as *laity*. Each and every person is baptized into mission to the world through ministry – ministry, which is the shape of the concrete life lived in the Spirit. The traditional threefold orders reflect back to us some of the primal, or archetypal, shapes which each and every Christian life takes. There are teachers in Christ, lawyers in Christ, janitors in Christ – but it is always some particular life in Christ that is baptized. In this way it is impossible to sever baptism from mission and ministry. Christian life is baptism into mission through ministry. To live in the baptismal waters is only possible by flowing in some distinct way – each and every life is a current or ordering of grace for mission in creation.

### Leadership: midwifery of giftedness for mission

The *mutual* in mutual ministry is the community of faith's lived response to Trinitarian love. We live into the invitation that *all may be one* through mutual recognition and mutual respect. Mutuality never implies sameness, rather it revels in the richness of the diversity through which love is embodied and expressed. Mutuality does not simply tolerate diversity, it cultivates and celebrates the kaleidoscopic diversity as revelatory of the munificent presence of the Spirit in creation.

Mutual Ministry thrives in and through appropriate leadership. Leadership's formation begins in the awareness that the holy dwells in and all around us in creation. To be is to be God's. Being God's is the profound truth in our profession that God is the Creator of all that is. To be a creature is to be God's creature. We might say that to be human is to be of the divine. The implication is that our most basic response to creation can be trust, not fear. We too, like the figures in Rublev's icon, can let ourselves begin with an ear favorably inclined for listening. God is already everywhere present in all there is, even if all that there is is also broken and imperfect.

Leadership's first task, or first response, in mutual ministry, is listening to learn where and how the holy is present and moving in the particular community at hand. Leaders live and act as midwives of the holy already present. Leaders, steeped in the wisdom of the tradition, work collaboratively with community so that gifts may re-birth God's presence. Leaders as midwives are not the *priest-in-charge*, because no one is in charge in a conventional sense. Leaders are not the arbiters of Robert's Rules of Order, because Robert does not rule here. Leaders midwife consensus. They trust in the creative and redeeming power of the collaborative process because it is charged by the living presence of the Spirit. Leaders do not rule over but invite into, because love does not rule but persistently and insistently invites. Love always respects freedom, knowing that creativity is the fruit of such respect. Where love, freedom and creativity are honored and nurtured in community life, the result is persons living in right relationship (or justice) with one another. Leaders, in this sense, are the midwives of a community of right relationship.

Our relationships are right when we, like persons of the Trinity, are ready and willing to receive each other into our lives as holy presence. The Baptismal Covenant expresses the primary ways of this holy reception. Baptism is an act of acceptance: we accept that we have always been and will ever be God's own, as is every creature. Baptism immerses us into a life of learning how this truth of all being God's is indeed true. Baptism initiates us into community forever learning

how to seek and serve Christ in all persons,  
how to respect the dignity of every human being,  
how to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ in all we say and do,  
how to be present to one another and to God's creation in such a way that  
Christ's reconciling Spirit might have its way with us,  
how to let go and be transformed by the Spirit into the new creation for

which we have been made.

### How we do it

In the Diocese of Northern Michigan, we seek to honor the uniqueness of each baptized person and each local community in our diocesan community. We understand that the responsibility for mission and ministry in any place belongs primarily to the people of God in that place. In most settings, we do not send ministry to a community in the form of a professional, seminary trained rector or vicar who might minister to and on behalf of the baptized. Rather, we seek to develop the ministry of all the baptized in each community. Seminary trained persons serve as resource, offering support and encouragement, sharing in the ongoing formation and education of God's people living the Baptismal Covenant.

We use the term *mutual ministry* to describe this partnership. It is a partnership between God and God's people. It is a partnership among all God's people, among congregations on the regional level, on the diocesan level and beyond to the province, the national church and the world. In all arenas, we seek to extend this partnership beyond our denominational boundaries, working together with our sisters and brothers of other faith traditions as well.

The role of the missionary is not to deliver ministry, but to midwife the birth of giftedness already present in the baptized into ministry for mission. In each congregation a unique ministry development strategy is designed and pursued by the members of the congregation themselves, supported and nurtured by the regional missionaries.

In all cases, the intent is to honor and support the uniqueness of each person and each community of the diocese. Leadership draws upon each one's unique set of gifts, encouraging and nurturing the trinitarian partnership amongst God's people in all arenas. Leadership is always seeking to support the daily Christian responsibility of all members of the community wherever they find themselves called to share in the priestly ministry of reconciliation, the diaconal ministry of servanthood, and the apostolic ministry of oversight, reflection, and witness.

*edited by Kevin L. Thew Forrester 8/20/02*