



Growing in the Vineyard

The newsletter for Catholic Lay Ministry Formation Students

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Often as a lay minister, I wish I had the clothing equivalent of a priest's collar – a piece of clothing that speaks for itself and answers questions about identity and authority. I feel this longing, as I stare down at the navy blue Y's lining the circumference of my plate piled high with food from one of Yale's residential colleges.

As a campus minister at St. Thomas More, the Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale, I have a weekly dinner in one of the colleges. Often, I am mistaken for a student, and I always wonder if our Catholic students will come or if I will eat alone.

But tonight, I will not eat alone. Tonight, I am joined by one of my priest colleagues. I take a seat at one of the long, wooden tables and wait for him. While waiting, I keep a close watch on the entrance to the dining hall, searching for any of our students. I see one of our students enter and wave. He walks over with his friend and says hello.

"Are you going to have dinner with me tonight?" his friend asks him.

"No," he replies, looking straight past me towards my approaching colleague, "I'm here to have dinner with my priest."

I turn my eyes to my penne pasta and run my fingers around the neck of my turtleneck.

"So what do you do again?" the student asks me, flinging his backpack down.

I smile, take a deep breath, and begin to answer again the question I often receive. He still seems slightly confused by my explanation of a lay campus minister, but by now, the priest has arrived and absorbed all of

his attention.

I push the noodles around on my plate. I take a deep breath and again feel the frustration of no doubt many lay ministers – that feeling of being overshadowed by the priest. Sitting across from him, I feel small and misunderstood. It is nothing he did; it is merely the power of the office he holds.

The dinner ends, and when I come home from work, I find the familiar embrace of my prayer chair – a comfortable recliner given to me by my mom when I began studies at Yale Divinity School. I close my eyes, and my mind drifts to a conversation I once had with a Sister of Mercy, who had just celebrated sixty years as a professed religious.

"Do you have any advice for a lay minister?" I ask.

She pauses, straightens her Sister of Mercy cross, and eyes me closely.

"What do you love most about the Church?"

"The spiritual tradition," I reply, "especially the writings of the four female Doctors of the Church."

"Keep reading them," she says, staring down at her double cross – symbolic for one's cross placed on the cross of Christ – "especially when times get tough."

I open my eyes and stare at the familiar face of St. Teresa of Avila, present in the framed poster I purchased while on a pilgrimage to Avila. I see St. Teresa focused in prayer with the Holy Spirit surrounding her. I ask her to pray for me: to pray for my encouragement and my

endurance in ministry when I feel small and insignificant.

I open my worn copy of *The Interior Castle*¹ and re-read some of St. Teresa's final words – "The Lord doesn't look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done." The beauty of the words reminds me again why I continue in lay ministry.

I am a lay minister so that I can be an evangelist for what I love most about the Church: her spiritual core and emphasis on community. At a time when young adults are leaving the Church, while searching for community and spirituality, I feel called to remind them that these two aspects are central to the Catholic faith.

This is what I encourage all lay ministers to do when feeling like I did after my experience in the dining hall: take time to remember what you love most about the Church and pray for the grace to make this the heart of your ministry. And remember that according to St. Teresa, God judges our ministry not by its greatness, but by the love with which it is done.

¹*The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila: Vol. II*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980), 450.



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In Search of the Fullness of Truth

“The human spirit is characterized by an unrestricted drive toward the truth, which is ultimately boundless. In every question we ask, we transcend the immediate point and reach dynamically for something more. Even in the most mundane inquiry we go beyond the matter at hand toward the next thing, and the next, and ultimately toward . . . what is infinite ... Human persons don't just ask questions: we are a question in search of the fullness of truth.” – Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*.

What does it mean to be constantly searching for answers, to be as Johnson describes us, a question? As students, we are taught to inquire and to think critically. We learn to refuse to accept facile answers, to probe deeply beneath the surface, to unearth nuggets of truth.

But is that all there is to us as students? Are we destined always and only to be skeptics, dissecting every answer, knowing this process will simply lead us to more questions? There is a fine and classic Catholic answer to this question. Yes and no.

St. Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” Yet his insight did not deter him from further inquiries and speculations, from his quest toward the fullness of truth. He realized that his questioning was itself part of the search for the fullness of truth.

What we, as students, have to remember is that our questing and questioning is not some dry academic exercise. Rather, it is fundamental, integral to our nature as human persons. We are not only students. We are people who are here to make a difference, to manifest the presence of God in the world.

All of us may be questions. But we can extend that understanding and think of ourselves as questions bound together, journeying in pilgrimage. The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner believed our pilgrimage was like journeying towards the horizon. The horizon is always unreachable. The point is to keep going. And when we journey together, we can both support and challenge each other. We can give each other strength. Finally, we know that we can reach out towards God through our questioning, through being the embodiment of a question, and through our reflection and prayer. Rahner believed that we are grounded in God, a God that resides within us at our deepest core and is, at the same time, infinitely distant. For God is not a binary either/or. God is an all-encompassing, all-embracing both/and.

The both/and God grounds us as we continue our search for answers knowing that, inevitably, the answers will generate more questions. We strive to retain this grounding as we approach, individually and collectively, what can be known and cannot be known, through our inquiry, through our reflection, through our prayer, through our faith, through our questions, through our answers, and ultimately, through our being a question.

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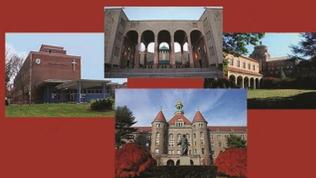
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