

By now, everyone must have read or heard
that the archdiocese closed Presentation School two days early:
not just two days before the end of school
but two days before the end of the existence of the school!
Children were not allowed into the building to retrieve their possessions
and graduation was canceled.
Another in a long run of public relations nightmare for the archdiocese of Boston.

Several years ago I suggested that there should be a job in chancery
for a person whose only responsibility was to regularly scream,
“NO! Don’t do that! Don’t say that! Don’t write that!”

I believe the position is still open.

Once again, it all seems to boil down to the question,
“Whose church is this anyway?”

Today’s scriptures give us two vantage points from which to view this question.

These two scriptures, Exodus and Matthew
give us two different vantage points
from which to view the church and its priestly mission.

The Exodus text reveals the church to be the tribe, the community, the people
whom God names a kingdom of priests, a priestly people.

The Matthew text shows us a leadership team,
missioned by Christ with authority to heal, raise up, rescue and serve
the people of God.

Authority is given for the service of others.
Authority is given to heal, raise up and rescue,
not to hurt, put down and ignore.

Authority is given to some only for service of the many.

Unfortunately, over the centuries, we have forgotten, in many ways,
that all of us are called by God to be a priestly people,
while the leadership of the church
has, in many ways, forgotten that their authority
is given them by God only for serving others.

The relationship between the priestly people in the church
and the people who are called to serve them
has been drained, in large measure, of its mutuality
and has become one-sided, top-heavy, out of balance
to the point where cardinals are called princes
while a priestly people has all but forgotten his royal lineage.

When the language of “priestly people” is used in the church,
it never fails to elicit from some a caution,

reminding us of the difference between
the priestly people and the priests who serve them.
Well of course the people and the ordained
exercise their priestly ministry in different ways!
That comes as no surprise.
But you would think that some bishops and priests are afraid
that somehow the people were going to steal their ordination
and make it their own.

Actually, if any are guilty of having stolen someone's priestly status
it is the hierarchy which, over centuries,
has robbed the people of their priestly identity.

“At the sight of the crowds, *Jesus' heart was moved with pity for them*
because they were *troubled and abandoned - like sheep without a shepherd.*”

The heart of Jesus must be moved with pity for his people today, too,
because the chosen people of the church are very troubled
and many feel abandoned -
especially those who have been abused and betrayed by the church.
And many in the church do feel like “sheep without a shepherd”
because their trust in their shepherds has been so shaken and broken.

The goal here is not for one “side” or the other to “win.”
The goal is to rediscover the one priesthood in which we all share,
and for each side to grow in reverence and respect
for the mission, gifts and insight of the other.
I suspect it will take a long time to reach this goal,
but ours can be no other goal.

Every time we gather at this table,
it is the priestly people of God who offer this Eucharist.
I, a priest, have been ordained to serve you
in the offering which is yours to make.
You can't do this without me,
and I wouldn't do this without you.

What we do at this table is an exercise of our priesthood:
an exercise of the people whom God has chosen to be his own
and exercise of the ministry which is mine for serving you.

May we find in the communion we share here
the presence of the One eternal Priest, Jesus,
whose priestly offering on the Cross
is his priestly gift to us in the Eucharist,
given to nourish us for the priestly mission which belongs to us all.

- *Rev. Austin Fleming*