

The Ordination to the Sacred Order of Priests of  
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Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
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Numbers 11:16-17, 24-25A

Welcome to this great celebration in the life of Beth Anne Nelson, this Diocese, and the Universal Church. Today, you and I will participate in a miraculous and mysterious sacramental action through which Beth Anne Nelson will be set-aside in a special way for the service of God. The events that will take place today are the culmination of a journey that began many years ago. A journey undertaken not just by Beth Anne, but also by her family, by every teacher who ever taught her, every pastor and committee who helped her discern her vocation, every congregation that adopted and supported her, every member of our Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee who reviewed her file and tested her call, every parishioner who prayed for her for the last few years, and every Spiritual Director, Mentor, Canon, and Bishop who took the time to guide her through this complex and difficult process of formation.

We all had a role to play, and this is very Anglican. We discern our call to ministry in community, we test this call in community, we are formed in community, and we accept orders on behalf of our community. Some believe that what happens at ordination makes the person somehow better than lay people, more spiritual or religious, more in tune with God, and qualitatively superior to the community from which she came. But this is not what happens at ordination. "Holy Orders places one in another position (i.e., order or group) in the community, not a better or more privileged place, but a place from which one is called to spend one's life exclusively in service of the people of God." (Richard G. Malloy, SJ. [www.bustedhalo.com](http://www.bustedhalo.com).)

Ordination then has more to do with a specific ministry of leadership than it has to do with an ontological separation of a person from her community. Ordination is not an elevation, it is not the crowning of a queen, and it is not the oath of office of a benevolent dictator. In the Anglican tradition we don't believe that the Church is divided into the ordained and the not-ordained, the special ones who wear a collar and those unfortunate pew sitters who are not as good as we are. In fact, we believe that through our baptism all of us have been called into ministry. We share in the priesthood of all believers. We, ordained and lay alike, share in Christ's own priesthood. We share in his mission for the world, and together, we build the Kingdom of God.

In today's passage from Numbers 11, we see a very interesting story: The people of God left Egypt at the time of the Exodus. It took them about three to four months to reach Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. They encamped at the foot of the mountain for almost two years. During this time, they received the Law, created a liturgical set of rites and festivals for the worship of the Lord, and spent a great deal of

time in nation building, creating structures of governance for the twelve tribes. But then, as the second year of their freedom began, the Lord called his people to start the long journey that would eventually lead them to the plains of Moab and the promised land.

Immediately after they left Horeb, the people began to complain against God and against Moses. Chapter 11 starts by saying, “The people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes.” Then they said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the good old days in Egypt! Now, all we have is this manna to eat!” They had forgotten all the blessings God had given them already for over two years. All they saw now was their misfortunes and their lack of provisions. They even accused God of not caring for them. They felt abandoned and sent into the desert to die. After each moment of misfortune, the people begged Moses to intercede to God on their behalf, and after a while, Moses became completely overwhelmed. He cries out to God, “If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once— ... and do not let me see my misery.” This is one of several times when Moses becomes a Colombian, “Just kill me now!” But God had a better plan, “Set aside 70 elders.” God’s answer is that the burden of the people should fall not just on the leaders of Israel, but also on the shoulders of local elders. Leadership from the beginning was meant to be shared.

During the early years of the Church, all we had was Bishops and Deacons and the Bishops were expected to be the leaders of all local congregations, celebrating the sacraments, preaching the Word, and engaging in multiple tasks of administration. As the Church grew by the hundreds of thousands, Bishops felt as overwhelmed as Moses and the need arose for a new order of ministry they called the Presbyterate. These new ministers were called to share in the ministry of the Bishop at the local level, tending the flocks in their charge, and exercising oversight over the celebration of the Lord’s supper, the agape meals, and various Sacraments and sacramental actions. Their job was not to be the shepherd, for this was the Bishop’s job. But they were to be under-shepherds who led congregations as representative leaders, as extensions of the Bishop’s ministry at the local level. 1 Peter reminds us that these presbyters were not to lord their authority over their flocks, but to be examples of Christian love and service in preparation for the coming of their Chief Shepherd, Christ himself.

Elders in Israel and Priests in the Christian era share something important in common. We are given a share of Moses spirit, or in our context, a share of our Bishop’s spirit. We are given a commission that is best seen as a representational ministry. We are caretakers of a ministry that is not completely ours, a ministry that belongs to our Bishops and to the Church itself. For these reasons, priests are not called to be princes or princesses enthroned in crystal towers, competing for attention and authority with other fellow clergy, and always weary and suspicious of their Bishops. Priests are not called to know everything, to be above all people, and to scatter their flock at times when parishioners resent or resist their leadership. Ministry is not about us, but about Christ himself. There are priests who believe people come to Church to see them and hear them, but it is Christ people are coming to see. It is God’s love and mercy people crave. What

builds churches is not the sophistication and cleverness of the priest, but his or her love for Jesus of Nazareth, and for the people placed in their care.

Another way to say this, is that we are called to be leaders. Leadership in the name of Jesus means that if anyone wants to become great, he or she must be willing to die in the service of God and God's people. There is nothing therefore about the ministry of priests that calls for a solitary, dissociated, unengaged existence. Priests belong in the public square, where all human drama unfolds. They belong in Market Street, Main Street and Wall Street. They belong in Rock Bottom street, the same place where most pain and suffering, most abandonment and isolation, and most addiction and disenfranchisement take place. Priests belong in the gutters of the world, which are often the places where you find the most injustice and violence. Priests belong wherever there is thirst and hunger for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and wherever there is apathy for the needs of the poor. We belong wherever there is a need for action born out of love; commitment rooted in the truth that Christ came into the world to save sinners; and engagement born out of a deep conviction that it is our duty to care for the least and the lost among us.

Priests lead churches from the self-serving isolation of our beautiful buildings into communities that are hungry and thirsty for the wholeness and restoration that only Jesus of Nazareth can offer the world. The job of a priest is as much "here" as it is "there" and congregations look to their leaders to help them tear down all walls of separation, to help them open those doors so wide that all humanity may come within the reach of Christ's saving embrace. Beth Anne, today you are given a charge to lead God's people following the great example of Christ himself. But there is a danger I want to caution you about. The danger is in the belief that today you graduate from a lesser order into a more executive order. Many believe that the diaconate is similar to an internship, but once you graduate, there is no need to bother with any of those former responsibilities. I believe this is a mistake. Much damage has been done to the Church by priests who abdicate their diaconal responsibilities once they are ordained priests. Regardless of how much you achieve or how many positions of authority God sends your way, you will never cease to be a servant to God's people.

Finally, remember that ministry is done in Jesus name and that without him there is not much we can do. Enter the mission field in full confidence that the one who called you and equipped you will be with you throughout your ministry. Ministry can be isolating at times, but don't forget that he walks with you. Place your trust in him because he can be trusted. Finally, let me tell you that this congregation is very proud of you and what you have accomplished. We will be here to support you in your ministry. Please, bring us along for the ride, we are ready and willing to continue to walk with you. May our Lord continue to bless you. Amen!