An Apologia *Pro Vita Scholastica*

G. W. Kimura*

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

*(Matt. 6:25–26a)*

Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers.

*(Acts 18:2–3)*

I have come to realize that, as a type of priest, I am a throwback to an earlier era. For one, I am a cradle Episcopalian. I didn’t convert from another denomination like so many fellow seminarians because of unhappiness with my church. I was born into the Episcopal Church. I will die in it. It is the church that first welcomed my grandparents and then sheltered them during a horrible time in U.S. history—Japanese American internment. When I say, “It was good enough for them; it is good enough for me,” I’m not being flip. The Episcopal Church saved my family. We, I, owe it everything. Now, after three generations, the elegance of the liturgy, the profundity of the sacraments, the message of inclusiveness and salvation the Episcopal Church preaches is in my bones.

I am, if there is such a thing, fiercely Episcopalian and have not been moved by the recent ideological controversies that have so rocked the church. Grounded in the breadth and scope of theology, I

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see them in the long view. In the context of past conflicts, present differences are hardly reason for schism. History will bear this out. It will be quite unkind to those who seek to tear apart the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion.

Second, I am a throwback because I’m not a second career priest, which is the norm nowadays. I was not “called” only after vesting in retirement from insurance sales or stockbrokering. I have been a priest as long as I have been an adult and have prepared for the vocation since adolescence. I studied theology and philosophy in college, went straight into divinity school, and returned to my home state and Diocese of Alaska, where my Japanese American family emigrated when Anchorage was still a tent city. I was ordained at the youngest canonical age. So unlike most priests since the fifties, I will serve the church for my entire professional life.

I now realize that I am atypical in a third sense. I have never been, and probably never will be, a full-time parish priest. Full-time clergy are expensive, an unrealistic burden on congregations where I live. Not independently wealthy, I earn my bread in a secular job in order to serve the church. I am a bi-vocational priest. I was able to go on for a Ph.D. and train for paying work as a professor. Paul was a tentmaker-pastor. I am a teacher-priest.

In the Diocese of Alaska there are fifty-six congregations. Most are in the equivalent of developing world communities, Eskimo and Indian villages where the economy is largely hunter-gatherer, as it has been for millennia, and where potable water and indoor toilets are the exception rather than rule. In most villages, there is no real cash economy. Therefore, there is no real cash offering to pay for salary, health care, or retirement benefits to the Church Pension Fund. Of the fifty-six congregations, six support a full-time priest. There used to be five. I was the priest at the last one to make the transition, right before leaving for doctoral studies.

I will probably always be a priest of the bi-vocational, St. Paul-the-tentmaker model. I will be so also because I am both a priest and a scholar, a type not unknown in the United Kingdom or in Roman Catholic orders like the Jesuits, but less frequently found in the Episcopal Church in the United States. But I will be so also because of the
more practical reason that having an outside job is the only way to make ends meet.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus says his followers are to live like the “birds the air” and “lilies of the field.” He chastises those who store up treasures on earth rather than heaven, because “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” By any objective measure, I have failed on that account.

I have never enjoyed the confidence of the middle class that I won’t fall out of it. Maybe that comes from growing up teetering on the edge. I am certainly not the first to recall the sickening awareness as a child when I learned what shopping for our clothing at the Salvation Army meant. In both college and divinity school I worked at soup kitchens and supplemented my meals there. When the priest at college saw the apartment building I lived in, he offered to pay for renters’ insurance from his discretionary funds. The offer was well-intentioned, but it remains a cringe-inducing memory, as I didn’t have anything of value to insure. It is one of those humbling reminders that how you think of yourself may not be how others see you.

Nevertheless, I chose the path, or it chose me, to a priestly vocation that from the outset never promised comfort, let alone riches. I had my mind on higher things: a life of service to God and the pursuit of theological knowledge and moral wisdom. Yet, as a practical person, with college and divinity school loans and now a family, I also had responsibilities that outstripped some of that idealism. My wife also worked while I was in divinity school and studying for the Ph.D. I cannot overstate how her sacrifices have made and continue to make my being a priest possible. Unlike the partner of a physician or lawyer, there was never the motivation of a life of material comfort waiting at the end.

While mucking through the ordination process (is there any deacon or priest, anywhere, who doesn’t feel beat up by it?) and waiting to turn that ripe canonical age of twenty-five, I worked for a year as a features writer focusing on religion for the local McClatchy paper. At
the same time, I served a couple of congregations. This started my life as a bi-vocational minister.

As a reporter, I was the first person to interview the Russian Orthodox Patriarch on American soil since the Bolshevik Revolution. (Aleksy II left immediately after, popping up on CNN the next day standing on a tank in front of the Russian White House.) I wrote about the politics of beatifying the first full-blooded Alaska Native (that is, Eskimo or Indian) saint. I shared stories of the tiny Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community as it struggled with questions unanticipated in the Bible, such as “Can Kodiak brown bear be kosher?” and “What is the kosher way to butcher moose?” It was a great job, during the last era when newspapers considered religion and faith, outside of sexual or financial scandal, a reportable topic. I viewed it as a type of ministry to the presumed “post-religious” readers of the late nineties and to Generation X. It raised awareness of religious issues and heritage without proselytizing, which doesn’t work anyway.

Yet, I knew I was not long for the reporting world. Newly minted as a transitional deacon, I walked into the newsroom in a clerical collar. An editor felt that someone with such a direct religious association could not be a disinterested reporter. I moved on to parish and chaplaincy work, continuing to write an occasional column in the effort to carve out a public space for a reasonable voice of mainline religion.

After ordination to the priesthood, I was called to a former storefront Episcopal congregation. Parishioners had just made two momentous decisions. First, they bought a former veterinary clinic and were converting it to a church. Second, they needed a priest. They couldn’t afford a full-time, experienced clergyperson, so I took over as part-time vicar. I also became an interdenominational chaplain to the two local universities and an adjunct professor. That made, at least on paper, one full-time job and two vocations.

In the first year, Sunday offerings were not enough to meet expenses. Payroll could not be made a nice biblical seven times, which led to ramen dinners and bounced rent checks. After two years, the congregation grew and finances became more stable, but then a fire broke out in the half-built sanctuary. It destroyed the whole church.

That fire brought the church to its knees. Ironically, it was also the best thing to happen to it. It drew the congregation together. People came back and new folks joined. A new, “proper” building was planned. It took four more years to design, raise funds for, and build. I deferred going back for the doctorate for a year, but it was worth it.
Presiding at the first service in the new building was among the most meaningful sacerdotal duties I have performed. At the same service, the church moved from mission status to a self-supporting parish and could now hire a full-time priest. To whatever extent I played in that, I am also gratified. The next week I was out of the country, back in graduate school, steeping in the philosophy of religion.

The Episcopal Church Foundation made doctoral study possible for me, something I have always also felt called to do. For that, I am profoundly grateful. I could return to the Diocese of Alaska, to make a life in an area where the model of a full-time, parish-based priest is for the most part a rarity, and the bi-vocational model the norm. As a fourth-generation Alaskan, I can now raise the fifth generation here in this matchless land rather than be forced to leave my home state. Most people believe their home is God’s country. Alaskans look out the window and know it.

Alongside all these un-Matthean, practical reasons for being bi-vocational, clear pastoral strengths arise from the St. Paul-the-tentmaker model. Being “in the world” by working a secular job (I teach and now head a humanities-based nonprofit) allows one to advocate for the religious point of view that too frequently gets marginalized or simply misunderstood in postmodern culture. This was true when I worked as a reporter. This is especially true in the university milieu in which I now work, which is too frequently uninterested in or distorts the life of faith, or is knee-jerkedly anti-religious. Ironically, most outside the academy know how important religion continues to be in the twenty-first century in shaping our world. Researching, writing, exploring, and teaching about religion are a valuable ministry that scholar-priests exercise. Scholar-priests bridge the life of the church, the ivory tower, and the wider culture. Or at least we try to.

Another strength of holding a secular vocation is that it frees clergy up to go and serve where needed on Sundays. I have helped out in numerous churches, both Episcopal and Lutheran, Anglo and Native, on the road system and in communities accessible only by airplane, all across the state. Most of Alaska’s fifty-six congregations do
not have regular access to the sacraments. These Episcopalians are desperate for pastoral visits. In fact, they are happy for any contact whatsoever from the church that lets them know they are valued.

I am also asked to fill in when a priest or pastor is sick or on vacation or when a congregation is between clergy, to such an extent that I am scheduled somewhere almost every Sunday. This availability is a blessing for the overworked priest who needs a break. It is also a blessing for the congregation, which, as an Episcopal church, is sacramentally-centered. Since the new calendar year, I have been serving as an interim in a church where the average Sunday attendance last year hovered around twenty. It is in no financial position to call even a half-time priest right now. Yet, at the Easter Sunday service, there were ninety-two people present and ten baptisms. With a little care, someday it will get there. Until then, it has to rely on a supply priest or go without Holy Communion. Having a weekday job makes this type of Sunday sacramental ministry possible.

I have never looked upon tentmaking as a second-class form of ordained ministry, but I was reminded that not all people, even within the church, think this way. Last year, I was one of five finalists, the only Alaskan candidate, to be bishop of Alaska. Although my biographical information was not included in the original announcement in *Episcopal Life* because it was a petition nomination, when it finally came I was described somewhat dismissingly as “a supply priest” as if such a background was inferior. Of course, I have also served as a theology and philosophy professor, university chaplain and department chair, ECF doctoral fellow, mission vicar, and even parish rector, a “real” parish priest according to such thinking, in the diocese. None of these were mentioned.

But for those who know the landscape of Alaska, it is perhaps this supply clergy role that is most needed and provides the best opportunity to appreciate the ministry gaps in the whole diocese. Serving as a supply priest, unless one is independently wealthy, is only possible by being bi-vocational and holding a secular, “paying” job. I hesitate to commit the logical fallacy of generalizing from one’s own situation, but I suspect that this need is not unknown in other dioceses, especially those with large rural areas and/or those with congregations that are neither large nor well-to-do.

Unless the church is to make the case that the only congregations that matter are those that can afford a traditional full-time parish
priest (which it still seems slanted toward in the annual parochial report), then the tentmaker, supply priest, bi-vocational ministry is another viable, sustainable, and replicable route. In many dioceses, this is an important alternate ministry model for the church.

To conclude, I want to return to where the story began. I have reiterated that in my own case, the support of the Episcopal Church Foundation has made possible a priestly and scholarly vocation, described as a bi-vocational or St. Paul-like tentmaker ministry. ECF helped fund my doctoral studies, which led to a Ph.D. in the philosophy of religion, university teaching, chaplaincy, administration, and nonprofit educational employment which has freed me to serve in various churches on Sunday across the Diocese of Alaska that could not afford a full-time or even part-time priest. This has been beneficial to those congregations who otherwise would not be able to take part in the sacraments.

It has also been beneficial to me and to my family. On a purely financial basis, which to be clear fails the Matthew 6 test, it has provided a means of stable employment where I can, along with my working wife, provide sustenance, shelter, health care, college and retirement savings, and so forth for us and our two children. It liberates me to a certain extent from the very anxiety that Jesus criticizes for a lack of faith. But that is between me and God.

On the other hand, being a bi-vocational priest carries peculiar ministry benefits for the church that go beyond dollars and cents. It allows such a priest to bridge communities within and without the church. It provides real world, relevant life experience that can inform his or her priestly ministry and theological scholarship in ways that are not always obvious or direct.

The Episcopal Church Foundation doctoral fellow program helps provide for a learned and intellectually creative clergy that give back to the church in many ways. A large number of the professors at our seminaries, for example, are ECF doctoral fellows. Thus, ECF cultivates teacher-priests and others for a church and a world that is and has always been in need of deep theological reflection. While the value of this exceeds any monetary figure, it nonetheless costs, because graduate school costs. The church is blessed to have a resource
like ECF, which invests in advanced study in this way. I am inexpressibly grateful to be a recipient of its scholarship assistance, because without it I probably would not be a scholar-priest.

This sort of respect for theological thought and the deliberative theological process of discerning where God is leading distinguishes the Episcopal Church from many other denominations. Investing in scholar-priests, and those scholar-priests in turn giving back by teaching and presiding at the altar, can only help us navigate the conflicts we find confronting the church. Cultivating such a church environment enriches all the faithful struggling to make sense of the postmodern, globalized, increasingly complex and secularized world.