

Ordained by baptism: When the "Thou" transcends the rules

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

Testimony, not advocacy, is my intent in this first foray into a subject about which church bodies argue: the “blessing of gay marriage/unions” and “ordination to clergy status” of men and women in committed homosexual partnerships. Let me separate the two. The “blessing” item is now part of presidential politics, a subject M.E.M.O never touches. But the “ordination” motif is focal in the Body of Christ, and is not the business of the unregenerate.

Impressed by my own church body’s [fair-minded materials](#) but dismayed by the heat of the arguments here as in all churches, from Roman Catholic to Anabaptist, I lapse into a wishing mode. I wish we could start this one all over, this time dealing with it not only as what Martin Buber would call an “I-It” dispute but in a conversational “I-Thou” form.

The “It” people in both camps write and read lengthy biblical, theological and psychological documents that cancel each other out. A fundamental mistake made by those homosexual people who would be ordained, or those who would support them in this quest, was to let their opponents type their pleas as part of “the [secular] gay agenda” or “the homosexual issue.” Put this way, the conflict leaves us at war with each other and poised for divisive denominational votes.

My perspective is that of a senior visitor at theological schools and ministerial assemblies, a wanderer who is open to listening and who gets approached by candidates for ordination. That experience helps me understand why so many moderators, presbyters, bishops, professors, credentialing committees and pastors are seen as “soft.” They regularly look into the eyes of men and women who have a consuming desire to serve in the ordained clergy. I puzzle with them about church bodies that proclaim we are all ordained to ministry by our baptism—a.k.a. “the priesthood of all believers”—and yet set standards of Christian living for ordained clergy that exclude gay and lesbian members of the church who have been

“ordained” by baptism.

My friends are bemused by what they call the “hermeneutical” issue: why the six or seven inches of print in the biblical testaments that condemn man-with-man and woman-with-woman sexual relations get treated “literally” while the much more strenuous Jesus-of-the-gospel strictures against divorce are not treated in the same way by most denominations.

Most of the gay and lesbian Christians with whom I meet don’t spend much time scrambling to pick up allies on a “gay agenda” or “homosexual issues” front. They are more likely to speak in puzzlement about the mystery of their own sexual identity, as unsought as was that of their heterosexual counterparts. They denounce homosexual promiscuity as much as others denounce, or should denounce, heterosexual misconduct.

Some cry when they talk about the portrayals that demean the quality of their covenanted partnership. Though they don’t bring it up, people in the parishes where they worship and where in ordained-by-baptism ways they minister point to the exemplarity of their grace-filled lives. We hear that he or she is “exactly the kind of person” or, in the “I-Thou” world, the person we would like to be our minister. Most of those I meet speak with far more clarity about their life in Christ, their call under the Holy Spirit, than do those who do not have to defend their very being, as gays do.

Jesus observed the Sabbath, but also knew when the “Thou” before him called him to transcend the boundaries of Sabbath rules. It is called “loving,” a loving that needs to be extended to gay Christians.