

Practicing Resurrection, by Nora Gallagher

reviewed by [Thomas H. Schmid](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

Rarely, if ever, have I been so closely drawn to a book as I was to Nora Gallagher's *Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith*. Told according to the seasons of the church year, the book is a chronicle of Gallagher's life at Santa Barbara's Trinity Episcopal Church. She came there as a tourist and stayed as a pilgrim. As we journey with her through that year, our own faith is renewed. Five of the six people at a recent committee meeting in the congregation I serve had read the book, and the sixth had been given it that day.

How could anyone who had written such a book not have wondered if she was called to the ministry? In her welcome sequel Gallagher explores her call. Her narrative artfully weaves together the continuing life of Trinity Church and its importance to her, the illness and death of her beloved brother Kit, the process of discernment about her call to the priesthood, and her year of work in a congregation unlike Trinity. The pressures on her marriage exerted by these events are an important part of the narrative.

In Gallagher's first book Trinity's leaders discussed and made the decision to call Mark Asman, a gay man, as rector. Asman was already well known to the congregation, since he had been serving as the interim rector, but the congregation as a whole did not know that he was gay, and his sexual orientation was not revealed to them. In her new book, church leaders wrestle with the issue of same-sex unions, and this time they invite the entire congregation into the discussion. Congregations that may be facing the same issue will find it helpful to eavesdrop on the concerns and objections of various committee and church members and to see how the church resolves this issue. In consultation with a trustworthy group of church leaders, the rector decided to write a letter disclosing his sexual orientation to the congregation, then to preach on the topic the following Sunday. Following the sermon the service continued quietly, but when Asman began the series of announcements about life in the parish he said, "I don't know about you, but I've had

quite a week," and the congregation burst into applause, then gave him a standing ovation.

For much of the book, Gallagher recounts intermittent visits to her brother Kit in New Mexico, visits that become more frequent as his death approaches. His devastating illness tears at her and his death leaves her grieving, afraid of crowds and wondering where Kit might now be and what his life and death have meant. Her priest and others in the congregation reach out to help her through this difficult time.

Asman helps Gallagher assemble a group from Trinity to work with her through a period of discernment about her possible call to the priesthood. The group meets with her for an entire year, gathering around the dining room tables of each other's homes, often sitting in silence until one of them is moved to speak. She notes how vastly this process differs from committee meetings, with their agendas and efficient time management. The discernment group is charged with taking time to listen for movements of the Spirit of God and to perceive what that Spirit is telling them about the particular gifts for ministry in one of their number.

Gallagher is chosen by the Diocese of Los Angeles to take one of 12 year-long internships in diocesan churches. Since the internship is part of the discernment process, the interns are assigned to congregations quite different from their home churches. Though Gallagher misses her participation in the life of Trinity, she begins to identify her gifts for ministry among an entirely different group of people at St. Columba's, recognizing that they are still the body of Christ. The mundane terms of congregational life, like "Bible school" and "stewardship," take on a new significance difficult to explain to her nonchurch friends.

Toward the end of *Practicing Resurrection* Gallagher tells of the publication of *Things Seen and Unseen*. For the first time it occurs to her that she does indeed have a call, but perhaps it is to be a writer, not a priest. As she travels to promote the book she finds her gifts for writing affirmed.

As a result of reading *Things Seen and Unseen* my daughter in Santa Barbara became a member of Trinity, and I have visited Trinity during each of the past four summers. I have seen Nora Gallagher listed as a postulant in the Sunday leaflet. Is she studying for the priesthood after all? Whether she is or not, she is sure to be pursuing her unique calling. One hopes that a journal of the next steps in her pilgrimage will soon appear.