

ETHICS IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

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Abstract

Pastoral ministry received a scholarly attention merely in this century. However, the Church has been on the move in the establishment of the Kingdom of God and was concerned about the redemption of souls. Our model in this regard is Jesus of Nazareth who went about doing good. Over-exposure to the world and unstable involvement in the institutional services have brought forward numerous challenges to the Pastors and some find it difficult to overcome these challenges. Secularization, globalization and the material affluence have considerably affected the pastors. There lies the relevance for spiritual, disciplined and the holistically efficient pastors for the successful completion of the ministry started by Jesus. Professionalism and excellence shall not be emphasized at the cost of Gospel values; instead, the pastors have to read the signs of the time and shall be capable of giving the core message of the Gospel in the present context. This article is an attempt to get into some of the current challenges of the pastors and emphasizes certain ethical principles in pastoral ministry.

Keywords: Challenges in Ministry; Code of Ethics; Integrity; Pastoral Care; Pastoral Ministry; Pastoral Prudence

1. Introduction

Pastoral ministry is known as caring of souls by committed persons for the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Though the

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legacy of pastoral care has a long-standing history from the very provenance of Christianity, it has never been systematically organized as it is undertaken today. The challenges of the ministry have been diverse from time to time. However, the Church proudly upholds the contention that it had taken utmost care to read the signs of the time and has taken necessary steps to overcome the challenges, so that She could proffer holy, efficient and dedicated servants to this ministry. More than ever today the challenges are all the more alarming, because globalization, secularism and individualism have crept into the clerical closure and the instances of scandals are on the increase. In this age of public shaming through bathos and histrionic displays of the Mystical Body of Christ the Church over and again gets wounded and crucified. Is there anything called an ethics of pastoral ministry? What could be normative in pastoral approach? At this juncture this article is an attempt to delve into certain important ethical elements of the pastoral ministry. This is undertaken in two parts. The first part deals with the major thrusts of pastoral ministry and the second part describes some of the challenges faced by ministers in the pastoral field. Moreover, in the final part we propose the need of a deep-rooted ethical fabrics in fulfilling the call of pastoral ministry in completion of the call of Jesus the Master.

2. Pastoral Care as Mission and Ministry

Pastoral care is an abstract term that attempts to capture the actual situations of God's action among the people. According to Don Browning, "it is a reflective process which the Church pursues in its efforts to articulate the theological grounds of pastoral living in various areas such as work, sexuality, marriage, youth, aging and death."¹ By the conscious and genuine involvement in the actual life of the faithful, the Church not only continues the mission entrusted to her by the Lord, but also affirms that She is the essential part of the mystical body of Christ. Seward Hiltner defines pastoral theology as "that branch or field of theological knowledge and inquiry that brings the shepherding perspective to bear upon all the operations and functions of the church and the minister, and then draws conclusions of a theological order from reflection on these observations."² The constant accompaniment and the generous administration of the sacraments and the sacramentals indeed nurture the faith life of the

¹Don Browning, *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care*, Philadelphia: West Minister Press, 1976, 14.

²Seward Hiltner, "The Meaning and Importance of Pastoral Theology" in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, J. Woodward & S. Pattison, ed., Oxford/Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2000, 28.

community and bring people closer to God. The Church is called to “help the Christian community increase its faith and its will and ability to love God and neighbour.”³ The purpose of pastoral care is to heal and support humankind as they walk together toward the Kingdom of God. This establishment of the Kingdom of God is a collective effort where the spiritual leaders and the faithful together swim against the secular currents of the world. For the worldly onlookers these efforts could be a mere activity where a few or a good number of people go after certain psychological satisfaction and social status, whereas for the individual it becomes a means of spiritual realization of one’s own destiny and the ultimate experience of the love of God. The Church and the ministry are not for their own sake but for the sake of Christ. Concept of evangelization and mission is pivotal for any attempt to return to a more biblical definition of pastoral care. This way it becomes both a mission and ministry of the Church. In the process of handling the leadership of this ministry and mission, there occurs sometimes certain failure in the ministry through indeterminate carelessness or due to lack of pastoral prudence. Hence there is a need to reemphasize the instructions on the ethics of pastoral ministry.

3. Aberrations in the Pastoral Ministry

Pastoral care in a restricted sense is the work of professionals, that is, people who have received the training to accomplish certain specialized tasks in Christian ministry. Any ministry of the Christian reveals in its praxis the implicit definition of Church and the subsequent salvation through the Church. And it is a matter of pride that generally most of the pastors responsibly fulfil their responsibilities with utmost commitment. At the same time, we also hear from far and wide disheartening matters on certain anomalies. In the pastoral ministry anomalies arise due to certain personal imperfections which are to be seriously dealt with. A scandal caused by a clergy becomes sometimes a referendum on the Catholic Church and the face of the Church is tarnished. Aberrations in the field of pastoral ministry proffers counter-witness. As torch bearers of the Kingdom values, anomalies and scandals are not expected from the pastoral ministers. Such incidents and experiences can weaken the faith of the laity and in long run it can also distance people from the Church. Especially when the secular world and the political and rational ideologists make such opportunities to defame the clergy in particular and the

³Gaylord Noyce, *Pastoral Ethics*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988, 30.

Church in general, they challenge the simple faith of the individual. Nonetheless there have happened many incidents which are proven true and some as fabricated stories as well. In any case, the pastors must strive to be above reproach.

3.1. Spiritual Corrosion Causing Moral Disaster

Most of the problems that occur in the life of the pastors are due to deteriorating spiritual life. Analysis of several incidents reached to the same conclusion that the fundamental source of the problem of the pastors is the dwindling spiritual life. Pope Francis says: "Many crises in the priesthood originate precisely in a poor life of prayer, a lack of intimacy with the Lord, the reduction of the spiritual life to mere religious practice."⁴ As spiritual leaders they are to administer the sacraments and take leadership in the prayer life of the people. The source and energy of a pastor is truly achieved through personal prayer and meditation in which one is able to converse with God and where the will of God is revealed. These are the moments when a person embarks into different spiritual realms of life. A true pastor is able to blend all his active domains to this spiritual realm and as a result one gains power and energy to walk towards one's responsibilities and active life.

Nevertheless at least in some cases there have been instances where these fall into the category of mere rituals, and then the ministry becomes a burden where one is unable to experience God, causing discontent in the vocation. Accordingly, some go after undue popularity and try to satisfy their ego with fame. Nonetheless the inner joy and the lasting satisfaction could be probable only from the Lord who said, "whoever is thirsty may come to me and drink from me" (Jn 7:37). In the book *The Heart of a Pastor*, Thomas Punnapadam observes, "Every ritual celebration is actually a moment spread across the lap of the eternity of God."⁵ The Liturgical celebrations are not meant to impress nor to astonish and to show off; instead they are to be transformed into the occasion where the Lord "will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known" (Jer 33:3). Unless and until we are revealed of the Divine Hidden things, we will not be able to maintain the interest in the prayer life, because of which some go after cheap admiration from the world. This indeed leads into the deceptions of the world and some fall prey to them.

⁴Pope Francis, "International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood," Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, February 17, 2022.

⁵Thomas Punnapadam, *The Heart of a Pastor: Personal Reflections on Ministry*, Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2015, 69.

3.2. Over Emphasis on Activities

Unlike in the earlier times, the modern Church is more and more institutionalized. In the past if the deacons were appointed to take care of the material assets of the Church, today the clergy are directly involved in the daily affairs of the institutions. Definitely, institutions are good means for pastoral work and evangelization, but at the same time an institution without the purpose of pastoral care is not a missionary activity at all. For example, a school is a centre for pastoral care, not only for the children but through children to the parents and for the teaching and non-teaching staff of the institution. In other words, we can say that it is the duty of the Pastor to take care of the holistic development of the persons entrusted to his care directly or indirectly, be it in a parish or in another institution owned or managed by the Church. Today at times according to the growth and functioning of the institutions the financial affluence and the public support also increase day by day. For the situational and temporary advantages sometimes even the local and political leaders approach the pastors. At least in some instances the pastors think that they are the boss/heroes of the locality. Going behind the excellence, sometimes pastors sacrifice the values of the Kingdom of God and thus the ministry is turned to a meagre activity. The Second Vatican Council rightly puts this problem:

In the world of today, when people are so burdened with duties and their problems, which oftentimes have to be solved with great haste, range through so many fields, there is considerable danger of dissipating their energy. Priests, too, involved and constrained by so many obligations of their office, certainly have reason to wonder how they can coordinate and balance their interior life with feverish outward activity. Neither the mere external performance of the works of the ministry, nor the exclusive engagement in pious devotion, although very helpful, can bring about this necessary coordination. Priests can arrive at this only by following the example of Christ our Lord in their ministry. His food was to follow the will of him who had sent him to accomplish his work.⁶

As Jay Adams puts it,

Pastors must consider it of prime importance, therefore, not to allow the church to be run strictly according to business principles. Businessmen in the congregation may clamor for more efficiency, etc. (and their pleas

⁶Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, ed. Austin Flannery, Vatican Council II, Bombay: Pauline Publications, 1975, 14.

must be heeded if the church has become inefficient), but they must not (as a result) be allowed to reshape the church by the principles of business and management.⁷

Hence in the midst of the tiring and draining journey of activities pastors should realize that God is actually present in the midst of everyday life; at the same time, this realization shall not prevent him from his regular spiritual activities.

3.3. Least Interest in Ongoing Formation

The human person is not a once-for-all fixed product; one's spiritual, intellectual and physical components do have a lot of influence from the surroundings and hence the personality of a person is being always evolved. This evolution happens when a person involves oneself fully into the aforesaid components and one achieves maturity. The maturity that is expected of the pastors is a real challenge of today. If pastors are to be resilient, zealous, and confident, they should be in cosy relationship with God, for which prayer must turn out to be profound and ongoing. It is for this reason that the documents on priestly life and formation give more emphasis on the need of a continuing ongoing formation all through the life of a priest. Subsequently, ongoing formation has been taken seriously by all the religious and diocesan authorities and have consciously included in the part of deliberations of the chapters and councils.

It is the totality of the endeavours assumed by religious in the consciousness that they are led by the grace of God to cling with a positive and active steadfastness to their spiritual and ecclesial identity, so that they may remain able and flexible enough to make a positive response in the Lord's name to the various demands of their vocation.⁸

A radical attachment to Christ is the goal of ongoing formation whereby one is able to connect oneself with the Lord and it is a true sign of an authentic follower. Officially the Church has made it mandatory to "confront the more difficult situations seriously" and "to study and evaluate objectively the new apostolic experiments and to correct certain initiatives which they judge to be aberrations."⁹

⁷Jay Adams E. *Pastoral Leadership, Shepherding God's Flock*, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978, 20.

⁸Joseph Aubry, "Ongoing Formation: Continuing Renewal" *The Way Supplement* 41 (Summer 1981) 74--88, at 78.

⁹*Mutuae Relationes*, the document published in May 1978, by the Sacred Congregations of Bishops and of Religious and Secular Institutes, on mutual co-operation, 40-43.

3.4. Clerical Behavioural Damages

Yet another area where a lot of imperfections take place is the troubles caused by the behavioural patterns of the pastors. Psycho-spiritual maturity and growth of the clergy is an inevitable aspect of the formation and a person who has not gone through with docility in this process during the stages of formation is prone to make problems in the interpersonal relationships and indicate infidelities in the areas of sex and finance. Deviations in the sexual and financial areas are increasing day by day. Today people sometimes question the integrity of the pastors and are bold enough to include the pastors for social auditing. Certain recent incidents have distanced the people from going to Church and receiving the sacraments.¹⁰ The trust that people have in the pastors is an important element which definitely attract the people towards the ministry that they do. The witnessing value increases when a pastor gains the confidence in the people. Immodest and pretentious ways of life have blotted badly the face of the pastors and of the Church.

3.1.5. Lack of Pastoral Prudence

Lack of pastoral prudence is one of the most serious problems deviations in the field of pastoral ministry. It is never admissible to forego prudence in ministry because it is the virtue by which we discern not only what is right but also how best to go about doing what is right. Generally, people say that the ends do not justify the means, hence seeking the right means is as important as deciding on the right end. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines:

Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; the prudent man looks where he is going... It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid (# 1806).

Absence of this virtue in spite of the long formation process has created a lot of problems in the field of pastoral ministry.

Having analysed a few common problems of the pastoral ministry it is clear that ethics in the pastoral ministry is an inevitable element.

¹⁰Here what I mean is the recent incident where a few priests exploited a woman with confessional secrets. Cf. "Secret Confession Allegedly Used to Blackmail, Abuse Woman; 5 Kerala Priests Suspended," *Hindustan Times*, Jun 25, 2018.

4. Some Ethical Elements in Pastoral Ministry

The fundamental approach of a pastor towards his sheep has to be of mercy and concern. For a pastor everybody is equal and is in need of care, concern and compassion. With this attitude when one serves the people one is trying to identify oneself with Jesus of Nazareth who went about doing good (Acts 10:38). There is an innate propensity in human persons towards goodness and God. As pastors they have to guide them to the right direction to the path of virtues and good moral life. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

Human virtues are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, and habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good. The moral virtues are acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love (# 1804).

The first handbook of a pastor is the Bible and the best model of a pastor is in the person of Jesus Christ. Keeping this in mind I would like to mention a few elements as the ethical principles in pastoral ministry.

4.1. Integrity

The concept of integrity has deeper meanings such as wholeness, morality, soundness, intactness and completeness. The prime responsibility of the pastor is to become one with the Word of God, to believe it, teach it to the people and at the same time put it into practice. The best way to preach the Gospel, is by putting it in practice. Pastor's life preaches more than what he utters on the pulpit. St Francis of Assisi, perceived this reality simply. Prior to sending his monks out to preach, he would teach them: Preach always, and when necessary, use words.¹¹ Spiritual and personal integrity are mutually interwoven, strengthen commonly, and necessitate being lived out in the priestly vocation.¹² Dual face and duplicity of the pastors normally distance the people not only from Church but also from Christ. "Integrity has various meanings. Integrity in doctrine means unedited scriptural faithfulness. Integrity

¹¹Cf. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/> accessed on 10.05.2020.

¹²Cf. S.D. Edwards & D.J. Edwards, "Priests' Experience of the Meaning of Integrity with Special Reference to Vocation," *Theologia Viatorum* 40, 1 (2016) 25-42.

in preaching means not being tempted to bend the truth. Integrity in belief implies moral consistency. Integrity in character means practicing one's preaching."¹³ Being a person of strong spiritual life a pastor has to blend his life with the spiritual life so that people see a role model of true Christian in him. Hence the pastor's life has to proffer a paradigm of living Christ.

4.2. Faithfulness

The vocation that a pastor receives, demands an unwavering fidelity to one's vocation. Each ordained minister has to remember it at every moment of his life because his soul is stamped by the indelible character of the Sacrament of Priesthood. The pastor has "a duty of fidelity to Christ and to the Church."¹⁴ In an increasingly secularized world a life lived in faith to God and the Church is a challenge, and at the same time without which the vocation finds no fulfilment. A pastor's life is not career oriented, rather it is a ministry based on faith and self-giving. Pope Francis advises all pastors and religious to be happy religious and priests; hence this joy is fully realized in being faithful to one's vocation until the death.

4.3. Need for a Personal Code of Ethics

Code of ethics in personal life is a sign of human beings. Generally, we say the nature around us has a style of functioning that is according to the rhythm of the environment which we believe was tuned by the will of God from the very time of its creation. So is with the animal world too. However human beings need to build their life on the basis of certain principles, the absence of which turn into chaos and crimes in the world. The life of a pastor is being moulded by these principles. His attitude towards others, his aptitude and commitment towards the responsibilities he is entrusted with, and the concepts with which he acts upon and behaves decide the growth and the maturity of a person.

4.4. Need of Pastoral Prudence

Prudence has got great role in the life of a common man. In our day-to-day life we make many prudent decisions. For our routine activities we never make logical calculations; at the same time thrown into new situations we need to make decisions prudently. "Prudence," according to Aristotle, "consists of wise judgment in

¹³Edwards & Edwards, "Priests' Experience of the Meaning of Integrity with Special Reference to Vocation," 38.

¹⁴Cf. Thomas J. McGovern, *Priestly Identity: A Study in the Theology of Priesthood*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002, 118.

particular situations, wisdom that can only be gained by experiential learning over time.”¹⁵ Pastoral prudence demands from a person vast knowledge in scripture, history, ritual, doctrine, human inclinations, administration and practical apprenticeship that demands certain acquired skills. The lessons taught in the seminary and the realities outside may not always be corresponding to the field where one ministers; hence the pastors who fail to proact and manage the show according to the need of the time have to face enormous challenges today. More than the doctrinal issues, the interpersonal problems tend to happen in today’s world especially in a society which is being secularized and a society that encourages a lifestyle of individualism. Media has got a lot of influence on the people where WhatsApp and Facebook have more listeners than a discourse of a preacher or teacher. The adapting ability of the society to a gadget friendly world brings forth unforeseen growth in the world. However, the cultural values like love, respect and compassion find always a place in the heart of the humankind. In this digital era the precise knowledge necessary for pastoral prudence may not be merely a rational-reflective, but an intuitive knowledge that proves that the action is appropriate to the context. Here I would like to propose a few suggestions towards the pastoral prudence.

4.4.1. Integration of Core and Role Identity

Core identity of a pastor is the foundation for his ministry and the role identity is something that he has to adapt or evolve into, as the time and context demand. Failure in any of these means failure in pastoral ministry. Often it is a saddening reality that in pastors one of the above dominates over the other and there begins the problems. Core cannot be sacrificed for the sake of role because the role is based on the core. Therefore, pastors are to acquire the ability to integrate both these aspects in their life. The success of one’s ministry begins where one learns to blend both.

4.4.2. Perception of God’s Grace and the Context

God’s grace is always and everywhere active and effective more importantly at those places wherever God is being preached. The Gospel preached bore fruits differently according to the context. God’s grace broke the barriers between the gentile and Jew. The preachers, especially, St Paul understood the contexts so well before he preached and he could read the mind of the people and the need

¹⁵ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, David Ross, trans., J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, 1142a-12.

of the context, according to which he saw the effects of the preaching.¹⁶ In the same way a pastor has to perceive the context well to be an effective minister. According to Craig Dykstra, pastoral ministry suggests unique capacity for “perception of the ‘more’ present in a situation.”¹⁷ Knowing the context simplifies our ministry and give us an ability to get into the shoes of others. Possessing this ability makes us wise ministers than mere a stunt activist. Thus, perception sometimes is the “interpretation of the world before us, and so action begins even before we act.”¹⁸ With these intentions in mind when minister acts in his field he sees God’s grace working in a particular context. Through the eyes of faith, pastor sees the wonders and gifts which makes God’s presence in the congregation entrusted to the care of the pastor.

4.4.3. Mature Interpersonal Relationship

Actions speak louder than words. People can write volumes on the actions than the words of a pastor. The pages written about the words spoken by Mother Teresa of Kolkata are limited to a few pages whereas her actions could be compiled into volumes. The seeds of the pastoral services are sown in the hearts of the human beings. For this reason the interpersonal relationship between a pastor and the people is very important. Lack of mature relations in the field have always created problems in the ministry and have been great scandal to people. Therefore, I would like to recommend a few suggestions for an effective administration of the pastoral ministry. First, the pastor has to do the service in a visible and open environment where the he is not misunderstood, because he is a public figure and no action shall leave suspicion and redundant gossips. In his ministry the pastor shall invite the presence of an adult when he deals with minors. Secondly, it is important to have the courtesy to treat all to whom we serve with impartiality, respect and care, respecting their physical and psychological limitations. The pastor should understand and appreciate the diversity of people. Thirdly, a sensible and accurate communication with everybody is needed, very particularly with minors and children. This also reminds of the sensible use of social media and of maintaining a strategic distance from all improper correspondence with young and old through email, instant

¹⁶St Paul in Athens, Preaching to Philosophers (Acts 17:15-34).

¹⁷ Craig Dykstra, “Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry*, Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008, 41–61, at 48.

¹⁸Mary Warnock, *Imagination*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976, 193.

messages, etc. Fourthly, never allow the pastoral relationship to grow into the realm of fostering relationship, rather be authentic. And finally, in matters regarding finance and construction maintain accountability, because discrepancy reported in the money matters damages the credibility of the pastor.

5. Conclusion

It was in the beginning of the 21st century that the understanding of the pastoral ministry received significant scholarly attention. The Church has gone much ahead, faster than we can imagine though far behind the present society, as it has always been. By involving into it She has evolved considerably. It is a process, and it has to be continued, because the prevailing challenges in the pastoral field are always on the increase. I have been trying to number some of them out and to highlight certain ethical principles in pastoral ministry. The issues mentioned in this paper are not exhaustive but suggestive. Nonetheless the necessity to have ethical principles is imperative.