

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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The Relationship Between Theology and Pastoral Ministry

Some time ago, I was chatting with a brother deacon involved in hospital ministry. As he explained the ins-and-outs of chaplaincy, he made a rather broad statement that struck me as quite odd. He said, “The Church’s teachings don’t always work pastorally in a clinical setting.” When I pressed him to explain further, he said that, practically speaking, theology doesn’t make sense when we’re dealing with a terminally ill patient or a grieving widow, and it’s the circumstances that govern how we minister.

In some respects, my brother is correct. The pastoral situation demands that we consider the circumstances and the persons involved. However, where I would take issue is in the relationship between theology in pastoral practice. In fact, I would argue that what gives ministry its distinctively Catholic characteristic is our theology. Pastoral practice is nothing less than a practical application of our deeply held beliefs and these beliefs are expressed theologically.

Unfortunately, there are those who reduce theology to an intellectual pursuit. To be sure, theology has an intellectual dimension, but it has a spiritual dimension as well. This is reflected in the words of St. Anselm of Canterbury who spoke of theology as, “faith seeking understanding.” This spiritual dimension was echoed centuries later by the Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar who observed that authentic theology is properly done on our knees.

Understood this way, theology is appropriated in the interior life and, in this respect, undergirds our pastoral practice. It drives what we say and do, in often subtle and indirect ways. It enables us to reveal Christ from those with a vibrant faith to those with no faith at all. To omit this critical element in pastoral ministry, is to weaken our integrity as ministers of the Church and diminish our witness.

Considered on a more fundamental level, personal integrity requires that we live what we believe. So, for example, if I’m a “Catholic deacon,” if I make that claim and wave that flag, then the adjective (Catholic) ought to be quite evident in the noun (deacon). Integrity necessitates that, if we’re to remain faithful to Christ and His Church, we must act in accord with what we hold to be sacred. In fact, we know we truly believe what we deeply hold when our acts consistently reflect these beliefs. In this way we “incarnate” these beliefs in our lives bearing witness to our faith in concrete and tangible ways.

This is not at all to suggest that upon entering a hospital room we break open the *Catechism*. There’s a time and place for all things. That said, in over 30 years of ministry, I’ve yet to find a situation where theology didn’t inform my pastoral practice. The challenge arises in

applying Church teaching in a charitable and prudential manner without diminishing its essence. Sometimes, this may even mean delaying a conversation until emotions settle.

I recall receiving word from the hospital that a man, who was already clinically dead, would be removed from life support and that his wife was requesting a Catholic presence. The man had already been anointed the day before, so I was assigned by the pastor to respond. As I entered the room and introduced myself, the wife signaled for me to come over to the bed. She put her arm around me and we both leaned over her dying husband. After a brief prayer, the respiratory technician pulled the tube and the man began to gasp. In an attempt to comfort her husband's passing, she said, "Go to the light. Go to our horses and green fields (a reference to their ranch)."

While the theologian in me shuttered a bit, this was neither the time nor place to take up the question of the final disposition of animal souls and man's particular judgement. This isn't to deny the relevancy of these topics. It's instead to appreciate the emotionally charged situation and the appropriateness of such an observation within this context. The best I could do is accompany the wife through his passing, establish a relationship, and leave open the possibility that our Lord may create a future opportunity to address these issues. Moreover, in that particular situation, I quickly realized that, in a certain sense, she was saying what the Church taught *as she understood it*. This was "heaven" for her, explained in the only words she knew. A more refined sense would have to come, but it would have to wait.

Thus, critical to authentic Catholic pastoral practice, whether in hospital ministry or indeed any other ministry, is a firm grounding in the theological tradition. This tradition, if it's to be effective, must be interiorly appropriated by the deacon, and prudentially applied in a particular situation.

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