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LPC-120
November 3,
2007

Theology of Ministry

There is a story we all know that describes my view of ministry:

There was a farmer in the frozen far north. During one particularly bitter winter, when all the ponds and lakes were frozen and the ground was covered in several feet of snow and ice, many animals were starving and freezing to death. One day, when a large flock of geese congregated in his yard, a farmer took pity on them and attempted to herd them into his barn where he could give them warmth and food. Flailing his arms and trying to drive them toward the open doors, he merely succeeded in scaring them and only a few found sanctuary in the barn. Knowing that the scattered creatures would soon die, the farmer despaired.

“If only I could become one of them,” he thought, “I could lead them, communicate with them in their own language, and show them the way to safety.”¹

God became one of us. He showed us the way. As members of the flock, we must carry His message to our scattered brothers and sisters and help them find shelter and sustenance in the sanctuary of the Lord. We, as lay people, are *in and part* of the world in a way that is far more intimate and humanly influential than the bureaucracy of the Church could ever be. Unlike the farmer, *we are one of them*, and our responsibility is to represent the open doors of the Church and Christ’s grace². By our example and our love for all of

¹ I do not know the origin of this story. It is not mine.

² USCCB, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, (Washington, DC, USCCB, 2005), 8

God's creation, our influence can be instrumental in showing His children a better way to live, a better way to love, and the warmth of the promise of Heaven.

I once believed that peace and harmony existed among all the staff members of all parishes everywhere. After all, I thought, what more can one do for God than to minister to His people? Why would that work not suffuse the worker with the joy and peace The Master has given to His laborers?³ After membership in a dozen parishes spread from the west coast to the Ohio Valley, I have begun to realize my naiveté. Humans who work in church offices are little different from humans who work in any office, bringing to the workplace their own personal fears, beliefs, and prejudice. Often they are spirit-filled, holy people of God who love Him, His Church, and the parishioners; but, sometimes, they are petty, jealous, and misinformed. My personal prayer to the Father and all His Saints is that I might serve him by helping to bring unity and love to my little corner of His Kingdom by ministering with an open mind, a caring heart, and a developing formation as a true disciple. I think the attitudes of the workers in a church filter out to the congregation and, therefore, a harmonious staff should affect the spirituality of the entire parish.

As parishioners tend to pick up the “vibes” of the lay workers in a parish, so are the workers affected by the attitudes of the pastor. Today, pastors must wear many hats from grief counselor to wedding coordinator. They must manage the parish as a business and make decisions affecting the enterprise as any CEO might in his or her business. Our priests, on average, are older and saddled with more responsibility than ever in the past. It is little wonder that they might seem to have precious little time and energy to tend to the needs of the closest members of their congregations. Soon there will be fewer, but larger,

³ 1 Corinthians 9:13-14

parishes that will only serve to worsen the plight of the typical pastor⁴. To the extent that I might serve God by sharing, in some degree, the burdens of parish priests, I believe that I can help open the doors to spirit-filled collaboration among parish servants to the benefit and nurture of God's people whom they touch.

I am already having a great deal of fun in my own parish. Our little church is small, only 350 members, and it will, no doubt, be closed whenever our pastor becomes unable to completely fulfill his duties and fully minister to his fold. I am trying hard to become an instrument of his longevity by becoming more involved in the day-to-day workings of the parish and, while doing that, learning how my training should be expanded so that I might serve a larger community when the inevitable finally happens. I am on the Finance Committee, I am a Lector, I am helping with Bereavement and Grief Ministry, and I will be hosting this year's Ecumenical Dinner. I also do some routine manual labor around the physical plant, manage the parish website, and help with all technology issues in the parish office.

The most important lesson I have learned so far is that I do not know much. Although I seldom suffer from lack of confidence or from irrational fear, I am anxious about damage I might do because of my ignorance: Will I say the wrong thing? Will I fail to follow the teachings of the Church properly? Will my behavior cast an ill light on the faith?

Desire to serve is not enough. Without proper formation, vast training, and a thorough grounding in doctrine, I risk the danger of doing more harm than good.⁵ I am

⁴ CatholicCincinnati.org / futures project

⁵ USCCB, *Co-Workers*, Part Two

driven to study as much as I am able, to take counsel from learned authorities available to me, and to pray constantly. Until the day I die and take lessons at the feet of God Himself, I will have serious reservations about my ability to minister effectively – these reservations should help me refrain from over-stepping my knowledge and should prompt me to defer to the proper authority of the bishop and the ordained clergy. Therefore, my anxiety will be a tool to help me respect the Church, her teachings, and her ordained ministers. I hope.

Nonetheless, I was blessed with a long and fruitful career where I was an effective administrator, leader, mentor, and business manager. The skills I acquired during my years as a senior corporate executive should serve me well to help administer the often complex and diverse affairs of a typical parish or parishes. There are, then, places I can serve even now while I am still in very early formation, which, hopefully, will continue for many years as I slowly develop more ecclesial skills.

The diaconate is, for me, a firm, albeit distant and hazy, goal. The learning and experience one undergoes along the path of formation toward ordination seems, to me, to be a holy endeavor that the Holy Spirit will bless. The increase in training and knowledge will help me to serve Christ's scattered flock even better and from a position of deeper discernment.⁶ More authority to participate in parish liturgy and ministry will help me free pastors and priests to deal with the deepest spiritual concerns of those whom they shepherd.

I will never, on this earth, know enough. My wisdom and knowledge will never be complete. My skills will never be much more than adequate. With prayer and the help of

⁶ "Deacon Formation Program," available at <http://www.mtsm.org/academicprograms/deaconformation.htm>; Internet, accessed 20 October 2007

the Paraclete, however, I know I can feed Jesus' sheep⁷ and lead a few of them to safety.

Thank God for the Athenaeum of Ohio and its faculty and staff for its continuing education opportunities to help in my continuing formation. I think the Church needs us all and, since we have been given much, much more is expected of us.⁸

⁷ John 21:17

⁸ Luke 12:48