

Some Talking Points on Lay Spiritual / Pastoral Care, Theological Reflection, and Meaning-Making

1. Pastoral Care is premised upon Christ's caution in John 15:5 –
 - *“I am the vine; you are the branches. He who lives in me and I in him will bear much fruit. Because, separated from me you can't achieve anything.”*
 - a. This familiar passage can be interpreted as covering the prerequisite for effective ministry. Not only do I as a pastoral minister or pastoral carer have to be *grafted* into Christ, I also have to function in a *mutually* effective way with Christ. In other words, for this ministry to be effective, Christ needs to work **through** me. This is the Holy Spirit at work.
 - b. Through my Baptism I was *grafted* into Christ and so gained not only the liberating “sanctifying Grace” of the Sacrament of Baptism but also the potential (via “actualising Grace”¹) to have a *fruitful* relationship with Christ. But I have to work very hard at having a *fruitful* relationship with Christ if I am going to provide *authentic* pastoral care to others. Good intentions are not enough.
 - c. The process of developing this mutually *close relationship with Christ* is called spiritual formation. Experience has shown us that if pastoral ministers and pastoral carers don't invest in their *own* spiritual formation they will not be able to sustain themselves through the challenges and difficulties of providing pastoral care to *others*.
2. Pastoral ministry or pastoral care is not something I do TO someone else or do FOR someone else.
 - a. I am not a:
 - a. Doctor
 - b. Psycho-therapist
 - c. Life coach/mentor
 - d. Social worker
 - e. Person in holy orders administering the Sacraments
3. When I go out to someone as a lay spiritual / pastoral carer I am offering myself to form a pastoral relationship with them.
 - a. The essence of that pastoral relationship is my offer of myself *to help them help themselves*.
 - b. The help I offer is threefold:

¹ The relevant sections of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on Grace are 1810-1811, 1987-2011, & 2021-2029. The January 2003 issue (Volume 57 Number1) of *Interpretation – A Journal of Bible & Theology* is devoted to the subject of “Grace” and explores questions such as: What is “Grace”? What is the extent of God's “Grace”? How does “Grace” relate to human conduct and accountability? The contributions are from leading educationalists in the Protestant tradition. Nowadays there is very little that separates Roman Catholics and Protestants on the subject of “Grace”.

- a. I am present for them in the most attentive way I can manage (called “advanced empathetic responding” which Denise has explained and will be tutoring you in)
 - b. I encourage them to plumb their own spiritual resources to make sense of what is happening for them. I do this by starting the conversation at a ***spiritual*** level and keeping it there. I can do this because I have learned the art of recognizing their spiritual issues. (We use the Verbatim method to tutor you in how to do this)
 - c. I nurture them in using those spiritual resources to deal with whatever is confronting them (Again, we use the Verbatim method to tutor you in how to do this)
- c. They have do the real work by:
- a. Taking the risk of *accepting* my offer of myself to form a pastoral relationship with them
 - b. Trying to make sense of what is happening to them
 - c. Using their own spiritual resources to deal with whatever is confronting them
4. I might *achieve* everything that I set out to *achieve* simply by nodding my head and saying “umm...ah” from time to time (This is called the “Rogerian grunt” after a famous psychotherapist named Carl Rogers who promoted its value as an appropriate response).
- a. This raises the question as to ***what*** exactly is it that I am supposed to *achieve* in my pastoral encounters.
 - a. Go to Scripture and you will find that the answer: you are to be the ***means*** by which the Holy Spirit produces “fruit of the vine”:
 1. Conversion of agnostics to Christianity
 2. Repentance by lapsed Christians
 3. Spiritual growth by practicing Christians
 - b. How?
 - a. By being an *enabler* or *catalyst* for the work of the Holy Spirit in the souls of others.
 - b. But I can’t do this unless I am a fit and proper person for the Holy Spirit to use
 1. In part this means having some *competence* in being able to relate to people at a spiritual level;
 2. It is also a *disposition* (which means engaging in spiritual formation to the point where I can see the world and the people in it from God’s perspective and live in the world the way God wills me to)
 - c. How do I go about attaining the right *disposition* or sufficient *disposition* to be a pastoral minister or pastoral carer?
 - a. The authors on spiritual formation (from St. Paul onwards) all say the same thing (in different ways): I must abase myself, humble myself, reduce my will in favour of God’s will, unite myself completely to Christ, become one with Christ instead of myself, etc.
 1. This is the total antithesis of modern notions of “self actualisation”

- b. How do I do this?
 1. Open my ears to the Word of God in Scripture-reading *daily* so that I get to know what is entailed in forming my soul to its meaning.
 2. Take the Sacraments frequently as sources of Grace.
 3. Pray daily and respond with courage to Christ's call to serve Him and not myself.
 4. Seek to serve Christ in absolutely everything I do each day by "sanctifying the ordinary things I do", trying to make everything I do a holy offering to Christ.
 5. Seek to serve Christ in everyone I encounter each day, however unattractive they may seem to me personally and irrespective of whether they can be of use to me personally. Again, by "sanctifying all my encounters with others", I try to make them a holy offering to Christ.
5. This course has been organized to help you attain both the *competencies* and *disposition* needed for pastoral care. The way we tie the two together is via Theological Reflection.
6. What is Theological Reflection?
 - a. Within the scholarly literature, Theological Reflection is normally described as a deliberative *process* for engaging seriously with particular ideas or issues or events that challenge Christians' understanding of themselves and how they should act in the world. Using the confessional language of the Church, the focus is on Christian *mission*.
 - b. The term Theological Reflection is not, however, ascribed solely to particular types of formal deliberative process within the Church such as Synods or Councils; on the contrary, it is used to embrace any deliberative process by Christians, whether it be an individual Christian coming to terms with a particular loss and grief experience, or a single pastoral minister or pastoral carer mulling through a particularly difficult pastoral encounter with someone, or a small group within a congregation discerning its local mission, or a bishop seeking to prevent a particular legislative outcome. What is common to all such instances of Theological Reflection is that the participant works methodically through a mental process to discern a desirable course of action and then acts and then reflects upon the outcome of that action and then amends the course of action and so on in a cyclic manner. It is the focus on the Church's mission

that makes the reflection Theological; and it is the quality of the deliberative process that warrants calling it Reflection.

7. What particular application of Theological Reflection are we talking about?
 - a. The focus of the course is on two applications of Theological Reflection:
 - a. first, the deliberative process that trainee spiritual / pastoral carers and pastoral care practitioners use for evaluating their own pastoral care praxis; and
 - b. second, the deliberative process used by praxis supervisors to assist trainee pastoral carers to evaluate their own pastoral care praxis.

Both are done via Verbatim writing, Critical Incident Report writing, one-to-one supervision and companionship, peer group review, and spiritual journaling.

8. What is meant by Reflection ?
 - a. It is a cyclical deliberative process. But such processes are not unique to Theological Reflection, and are applied throughout the world of business and government administration and the NGO² sector. Strategic planning, corporate planning, business planning, operational planning, program evaluation, product evaluation, quality management, and performance appraisal systems all use this same cyclical deliberative process. The secular world also focuses on mission, vision, and desired outcomes.
 - b. Within the professions, a similar cyclical deliberative process applies, and it is generally termed evidence-based practice. The focus is on professional identity (which includes mission) and outcomes (e.g., health outcomes, educational outcomes, etc).
 - c. The logical conclusion from this overview is that Theological Reflection is one facet of a generic human propensity for purposeful reflective endeavour.
 - d. Deliberative processes of this nature have attracted the attention of metaphysicians and philosophers, educators, and scientists investigating how the brain works. Their insights are important because they have implications for both the theological aspects of Theological Reflection and the pedagogy of reflection as a deliberative process of learning (including learning from experience).
9. Why is Theological Reflection important?

² NGO = Non-Government Organisation (examples: CentaCare, St. Vincent De Paul, and Red Cross)

- a. Pastoral carers are members of an ecumenical “community” of empathic listeners who operate in a wide variety of institutional settings offering constructive support to others in “meaning-making”.

10. What is meant by “meaning making”³?

- a. Across both the literary arts and the sciences of the mind you will find thinkers advocating the following propositions about how human beings make sense of their life experiences:
 - human life is developmental as well as biological (nurture as well as nature)
 - most human beings typically experience their lives as an autobiographical narrative (or story) or at least a collection of autobiographical stories;
 - autobiographical memory is essentially a constructive and reconstructive phenomenon rather than a reproductive one
 - a narrative outlook on one’s life (a construct) is essential to a sense of personhood and well-being
 - a person’s autobiographical memory (self-narrative) is not necessarily reliable because they can engage *unconsciously* in invention, falsification, confabulation, revisionism, and fiction
 - the autobiographical memory or narrative is somehow related to the group of powerful emotions we associate with personal morality: pride (self-love), conceit, shame, guilt, regret, and remorse
 - the autobiographical memory or narrative has a special relevance in the present time *both emotionally and morally* because it is the *present-shaping* consequences of the past that matter when we are under pressure by others, by poverty, by ill-health, by disability, by being imprisoned, etc.
- b. These propositions might seem trite to mature adults but their efficacy is important for those whose job is to *intervene* to help us change⁴ e.g., spiritual directors, medical practitioners (especially those working in the mental health field), therapists, those working in prisoner rehabilitation programs, etc.
- c. Pastoral carers become quite familiar with the urge for story telling that patients, residents, inmates, etc engage in. So, the propositions listed above about the nature of autobiographical narrative all make sense. But pastoral carers need to understand *how* this narrative process works so that their *listening* can be more empathic and they can become better at intuiting the *spiritual significance* of what they are hearing.
- d. The story telling that pastoral carers hear from patients, residents, inmates, etc. involves a process of construction or shaping of life events. At play in their heads seems to be some sort of relatively large scale coherence-, unity-, or pattern-

³ This section was inspired by Strawson G.’s Commentary in the October 15 issue of the Times Literary Supplement. However it does not include his arguments in support of the existence of a non-narrative (or what he calls “Episodic”) form of meaning making for a very small group of people.

⁴ It must be stressed that it is ***not*** the role of a pastoral carer to intervene to change someone.

seeking or form-finding process. But they are not just producing a connected account of their life as in a family history. Whatever is going on in their heads obviously entails the ability to detect the developmental (nurture) coherences of their life (or to put it in less technical language: to apprehend the deep personal constancies that manifest themselves in their life).

- e. The story telling that pastoral carers hear seems to be a response to the need of patients, residents, inmates etc. to explain *to themselves* their current predicament in terms of the bad things that have happened to them before and how they coped on those occasions. It is the role of the pastoral carer to provide the **catalyst** for this story telling to happen. People don't seem to be able to story-tell like this *to themselves*; they seem to need someone else to be present, even though the listener may contribute very little to the narrative process.
- f. While the patient, resident, inmate, etc. is engaging in this process of "meaning making" by story-telling, the pastoral carer is engaging in a parallel "meaning making" process of his or her own that simultaneously seeks answers to the following questions:
 - have I really understood what this person is telling me? (accurate empathic listening)
 - what is the major theme of this story?
 - what issues (interpersonal etc.) does this person have?
 - what emotions (fear, anger, disappointment, etc.) am I detecting?
 - does what I am hearing make sense in terms of the theory I was taught about personal development and reactions to loss and grief?
 - what is the *spiritual significance* in what this person is telling me? (relationship with God etc.)
 - what passages of Scripture come readily to my mind as I listen to this person?
 - how do I engage with this person at a *spiritual* level?

11. How can the Scriptures help me in my work as a pastoral carer?

- I *hear* Scripture calling me to the apostolic dimension of my work
- I *listen* to the Scriptures in order to nourish and sustain myself in my apostolate
- I *search* Scripture for parallels that will resonate with me when I hear people "meaning making" about their experiences
- I *read* Scripture with people in times of distress to help them plumb their own spiritual resources
- I *share* the reading and hearing of Scripture and the singing of hymns⁵ with other pastoral ministers or pastoral carers as symbolic of all that we have in common as pastoral carers.
- I *use* the Scriptures when reflecting⁶ upon the theological implications of my ministry encounters with individual patients, residents, inmates etc.

⁵ most hymns are passages (or messages) of Scripture put to music

⁶ all training courses for pastoral carers use the Verbatim method of reflective praxis and this includes selecting and reflecting upon a text of Scripture that they feel is relevant to the particular encounter.