

Pastors: Servants of the Lay Faithful
PT 501 – Pastoral Theology

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In the second half of his autobiography, Blessed John Paul II wrote the following words as a reflection on a bishop's exercise of authority: "If a bishop says: 'I'm in charge here' or 'I'm only here to serve,' then something is missing: He (sic) must serve by ruling and rule by serving."¹ The same words can be applied to the parish priest as he shepherds and guards his flock. In fact, especially in the context of modern American parish life, if such an approach is not taken and balance is not struck between these two, a priest is doomed to failure. He will either encounter the parish resenting and rejecting his authoritarian tone, or he will become so permissive in his attempt to portray only a priesthood of service that he must answer at his own judgment for never having retrieved his wayward sheep. This discussion will attempt to show how a priesthood of ruling and serving can be lived to bring the laity of a parish into communion with Christ and to lives of true sanctity in the secular world, their vocation through baptism.

The first and most important way that a priest can serve the laity of his parish is through providing the Sacraments in a holy, reverent, and correct manner. Clearly, it is not necessary for a priest to become a rubricist or collapse in frustration when, as will frequently be the case, something of the liturgies does not go smoothly. However, a priest must take care to offer the people an authentic liturgy so that it can truly be the source from which the laity receive their strength to approach their lives in an increasingly secular world and the summit to which their lives are ordered. To that end, one of the first things that would seem important is offering the liturgy according to the mind of the Church, not according to his own desires or interpretations, even if these seem to the priest to be expedient to fostering better understanding of the mysteries to the faithful. Instead, such departures do not "serve authentic pastoral care of proper liturgical

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, Warner ed. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2004), 50.

renewal.”² In this circumstance, it seems that a priest will have to frequently exercise his authority in love to correct misunderstandings within a parish community. Those errors need not be immediately corrected in their entirety, although some may require immediate attention, but the truth of the Liturgy as set forth by the Church must be provided to the people. While this refers mostly to the Mass since that is obviously the greatest point of contact a priest has with the majority of his flock, it must also be understood to extend to the other liturgical actions and the rest of the sacramental life of the parish. Similar clarity and charity should be visible to the faithful when a priest baptizes, marries, or presides over a funeral.

In addition to his utmost care in the externals of administering the Sacraments, the priest can facilitate a growth in holiness in the laity by helping them see more clearly how Scripture affects their lives in a concrete way. The starting point for this can and should be within the context of the Sacraments and Liturgy; indeed, the celebration of each Sacrament and even blessing includes a liturgy of the word. However, the faithful are rarely conscious of this connection, and they often do not “appreciate the unity between gesture and word.”³ Hence, it is the responsibility of the pastor, even when the actual implementation is handled by a parochial vicar or deacon, to show the laity the interplay of Scripture with their sacramental life⁴, and, from that, the interplay of both in their lives in the secular world. Another way that a priest can and should facilitate a greater appreciation of Scripture in the lives of the laity is by offering bible studies and discussions outside of the times of the normal Sunday or daily Masses. Certainly, this will not reach all of the people of the parish, but it seems that, as the faithful see that the priest has an “attitude of service,” they will “spontaneously listen to him and willingly

² Congregation For Divine Worship And The Discipline Of The Sacraments, *Instruction On the Eucharist (liturgy Documentary)*, 1st: ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), 11.

³ Benedict XVI, *The Word of the Lord: Verbum Domini* (Washington DC: Pauline Books & Media, 2010), 53.

⁴ Ibid.

submit to his authority.”⁵ That submission often includes a desire to grow deeper in their faith, a desire that is already planted deep in each person, but which must, in the modern world, frequently be awakened by the example and leadership of the priest. Once awakened, it stands to reason, that, given the opportunity, parish members will join in such offerings as their time and other responsibilities permit.

In addition to these areas, it seems that it should be necessary that a pastor make time specifically for those who work in the office and assist him in the day-to-day management of parish affairs. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops noted in 2005 that almost 33,000 laypeople worked over twenty hours each week in paid or volunteer positions in parishes throughout the United States.⁶ There is no shortage of opportunities for the pastor to minister directly to these members of the parish staff, both actively and by simple example. This can and should include common prayer with the staff, for example, some parishes celebrate the Morning Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours in common with the pastor and the entire staff one or more times each week. This could be combined with a regular meal at which the staff sits down to share lunch during the workday to facilitate community and charity within the parish staff. The Pastor should also offer opportunities for the staff to grow in their knowledge of Jesus Christ and His Church; these opportunities could be provided offsite or onsite and by the pastor or other expert members of the staff or persons from outside the parish entirely. Similar opportunities can and should be developed to help the parish staff members to improve the pastoral application of their knowledge within their specific spheres. Even a parish’s accountant must realize and be able to express his relationship to the pastoral mission of the parish rather than be trapped in the parish books. Finally, it is imperative that a pastor avoid the trap of ministering to every member

⁵ John Paul II, 49-50.

⁶ *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: a Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry / United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*. (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2006), 13.

of his parish except those who work with him on a daily basis. In short, members of a parish office should be able to look to their pastor for both paternal leadership and loving support.

One additional aspect that seems necessary to note is that, for a priest to be able to exercise any leadership in a parish, he must be present to that parish. In the modern age, too many priests still see their role so much as sacramental ministers that their pastoral ministry is neglected. Priests must be visible to their parishes both on and off official duty. That is not to say his priesthood can take time off. Indeed, that visibility as priest both in the Sacraments and sacramentals and in daily life at grocery stores, restaurants, sporting events, and sometimes just about town is essential to the priesthood returning to being both a service and a shining example to the secular world.

There are a plethora of other possible applications for a priest to relate to the laity of a parish, but, if each is weighed and discerned with the balance of service and ruling in mind, a priest will be bringing the best of his human person and abilities to Christ so that Christ's supernatural graces can fill in where he lacks. If a priest is visible to his parish only when he celebrates Mass or the Sacraments or sacramentals, he will be viewed as so aloof that he cannot claim to be a servant of his parish. If he spends so much time as a servant that he can never correct or guide the people, he will never be able to draw them closer to Christ. Instead, he must always balance these two sides of pastoral ministry.

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