

The Called Life

An Essay on the Pastoral Vocation

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The pastoral office is God's way of helping the church discern its true vocation in the world. Before the ordained ministry is a job or a profession, it is a gift from above.

I have a friend who is a carpenter. Although he delights in satisfying his customers, his real joy is in the wood itself and the shaping of it into cabinets, chairs, or other pieces of fine furniture. He understands that the texture of yellow pine wants to be sanded and rubbed with a different stroke than the harder and more stubborn oaks. He devotes hours to matching grains and stains in order to maintain a harmony that sometimes only he can discern. I think he has a vocation to do what he is doing, but he never uses the word.

I also know a woman who is a physical therapist. She spends her days gingerly stretching knees, shoulders, and hips, making them go to places they have not been in a long time. She does so with a magical mixture of intimacy and matter-of-fact professionalism. Whether working with a star basketball player or an aging baby-boomer, she is endlessly solicitous of each of her patients, treating them not as physical products or objects of her expertise, but persons. She has a vocation to do what she does, but if she were to use the word at all, and she probably wouldn't, it would most likely be as a synonym for her profession. I doubt that either my carpenter friend or my physical therapist would draw a connection between what they do and the call of God, which is a great loss, both to them and the world.

CREATION AND CALL

I begin this essay on the pastoral vocation with comments on my non-clerical friends because to do otherwise encourages a distorted view of vocation. The usual approach to vocation begins from a hierarchical perspective in which the pastoral office is cast as the norm for all discussions of vocation—a perspective foreign to both testaments of Scripture.

The Bible begins with creation. When God created the world he called it into existence by naming it and affirming its goodness. Then, in the ultimate act of power-sharing, the Lord God paraded each of his lesser masterpieces, such as the warthog and the turtle, before the man for him to name. Between them, they named the world in its wholeness and all its parts. God seems not to have required of the man any worship or sacrifice other than his acknowledgment of the Lord and the Lord's gifts; the human was only to participate in the act of naming and to heed God's warning about the Knowledge Tree.

It was inevitable, then, that the rupture between God and human beings should occur linguistically in the form of the serpent's duplicity with words: "Did God say? . . . You will not die." Even the tragic recognition scene takes an auditory dimension when the man and the woman hear the sound of the Lord's voice and are afraid.

The sequence of God's creation and humanity's Fall is the origin of all vocations. By virtue of its creation, each creature has the obligation to answer the call "Where art thou?" and each must respond in a way appropriate to its nature and distinctive gifts.¹ Human beings are inscribed with the added longing for the lost partnership they once enjoyed with their creator. This partnership consists in acknowledging the creator and, in communion with him, caring for the rest of the created order. The ultimate goal of creation, then, is that all people would rediscover their vocation in the world and acknowledge its true source.

Sometimes, however, children stray into other neighborhoods and playgrounds farther from home than they should. A loving mother doesn't call the children once for supper and, hearing no response, forget about them. In baptism, God reiterates the call, this time with gracious specificity, naming each person and reclaiming each as a son or daughter. The church provides that good "home" in which the children can work and pray to discern their call from God.

¹See Rowan Williams' two sermons on vocation in *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1995), 147–59. Also helpful is Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

THE PASTORAL VOCATION

The pastoral office is God's way of helping the church discover its true vocation in the world. It is God's gift to the church. The office of pastor was never meant to create a hierarchy of privileges in the body of Christ. It is not that sort of gift. The Lima document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* goes so far as to call ordination a "charism," which does not refer to an individual's talents but a specific, ordered gift from the Spirit for the benefit of the whole church. Of this term Robert Jenson warns, "Churchly managers and professors do not like to interpret ordained ministry by its charism, for a clergy that understood itself in the freedom of the Spirit would not be easily managed or trained."² Anyone who occupies the pastoral office has a charism for helping others see and hear God more clearly. The most fundamental mark of the office of *pastor*, then, before it was blurred by theological debates, ecclesial rank, and social stereotypes, is the special gift by which it enables the people of God to discern their call.

The pastoral office does its job by means of the ministry of the word, for the word is not only the most effective tool we have, but also the *only* tool we have for acknowledging God and naming the gift. Whatever makes a man or woman a minister, then, is intimately bound up in the word of God. Whoever is "set apart for the gospel" (Rom 1:1) is called through the medium of the gospel. As Joseph Sittler put it, the minister's entire existence is concentrated at the point of declaration.³

THE LOSS OF THE WORD

Today we find the church cautiously distancing its ministry from the word of God. It does so under the modern pressure of professionalism and the postmodern impulse to pluralism, both of which are offended by spoken affirmations of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As a matter of public policy, the wider culture still wants something like ministry, much in the way it encourages volunteerism and philanthropy, but it thinks it can have it without the word of God. Faith-based initiatives are welcome; preaching is not.

Stripped of its word, however, the ministry disintegrates. Without its organizing principle of acknowledgment, the pastor's calling relapses into the chaos of busywork. The minister is sliced, diced, and cubed into a thousand contacts and competencies but left without a heart of passion in the word, without a vocation. Sittler's classic phrase for this disintegration was "the maceration of the minister."⁴ Eugene Peterson spells it out in *Under the Unpredictable Plant*:

The world of religion generates a huge market for meeting all the needs that didn't get met in the

²Robert Jenson, *Lutheran Partners* (July–August 1985) 27.

³Joseph Sittler, *The Anguish of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 8.

⁴Joseph Sittler, *The Ecology of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961) 76.

shopping mall. Pastors are conspicuous in this religious marketplace and are expected to come up with the products that give customer satisfaction. Since the needs seem legitimate enough, we easily slip into the routines of merchandising moral advice and religious comfort. Before long we find that we are program directors in a flourishing business” or licensed practitioners in a helping profession.⁵

CHARACTER VERSUS PROFESSIONALISM

George Bernard Shaw once claimed that “all professions are conspiracies against the laity,” and the ministry is one of them. A profession defines and regulates the competencies expected of its member-practitioners. Not only does it set standards, it establishes boundaries between various fields of expertise. Such boundary-setting is not new to the church. The medieval church posited a substantial difference between priests and the unordained, and modern Protestantism, though long ago discarding ontological theories of ordination in favor of something nearer to functionalism, still seeks substantial competencies by which to differentiate its clergy from the laity. It is not uncommon for seminarians to think they are being trained to know more than their future employers so that they will be able to manage the church more effectively.

The undeclared aim of ministry has too often been the solidification of the minister’s position among the professions rather than the acknowledgment of a common vocation among all God’s people. Protestantism periodically reimagines its ministry in ways that enhance its utility in a therapeutic, managerial, or entrepreneurial culture, but not without losing something of its soul in the process. Ministry cannot be reduced to therapy or managerial technique. The sermon that begins, “Modern psychology tell us” may overlook the public and ethical dimensions of the Christian faith. The effective pastor/manager—what some parishes are calling the “executive priest”—is reaping rewards disproportionately higher than the faithful pastor or gifted teacher. The entrepreneurial genius that fills the “emerging church” with seekers on Sunday morning too often squanders its precious opportunity on video clips from “The Lord of the Rings” and other entertainments instead of doing the harder work of formation and discipleship.

Perhaps it is too easy to criticize and even caricature the professionalization of ministry. A profession once entailed a public witness to the truth and an agreed-upon standard of excellence. The “spectacular growth of professions,” however, threatens to transform the public standard into enclaves of highly specialized techniques.⁶ With this in mind, we ought to retain a default suspicion not of the professions but of professionalism and its preoccupation with specialization, process, credentials, and measurable outcomes, the net effect of which is to under-

⁵Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 172–3.

⁶The phrase is Conrad Cherry’s in *Hurrying Toward Zion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 152. Cf. Jackson W. Carroll, “The Professional Model of Ministry—Is It Worth Saving?” *Theological Education* 21 (Spring 1985).

mine the minister's priestly and prophetic identity. These are all epiphenomena of ministry but should not be mistaken for the gift itself.

It is not difficult to understand the attractions of the professional model of ministry. In addition to its ordering of competencies, a profession allows for an interval of disinterest between one's private life and public practice. The privatization of vocation is taken up by Alasdair MacIntyre in his influential book, *After Virtue*, in which he reminds us that certain classic roles once functioned as public models for the moral life. These roles were filled by persons whose lives seemed to fit them perfectly. Such persons he calls *characters*. In a character, no distinction exists between role and personal traits. Society looks to these characters for guidance, for around them cluster important virtues and instructive traditions.⁷ For example, in the United States we have an on-going debate over what constitutes effective public education and decent health care only because the ideal character of teacher or doctor remains imprinted in the public imagination. As the ideal lawyer, Atticus Finch, puts it in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, "I can't live one way in town and another way in my home." Today, public *characters* are being superseded by hidden *functions*. The career bureaucrat or the software designer may be no less professional in their expertise, but they are largely hidden from view. The classic professions were never merely public performances; they were public standards by which others could take the measure of their vocation.

Ministers and their families, though still occupying public space, chafe against their conventional roles and crave the interval of disinterest, the moment when they can be someone other than "the Reverend," "Preacher," or, worse, "the Preacher's Kids." They yearn for a few stolen moments, at best, when they can cease to be untiring advocates of the gospel and spotlighted representatives of the holy catholic church. None of us wants to be absorbed into a role or ruled by a public persona or office, no matter how honorable and holy. It's no fun to trade your real name for "Preacher." Most of us would rather *not* be "set apart for the gospel" if it means the loss of personal autonomy.

A professional, after all, *can* live one way in town and another at home. Indeed, it is the mark of the professional that he or she can get the job done even in the midst of divorce proceedings, bankruptcy, or other forms of personal chaos. Ministers, too, tend to be performance-oriented in the way they view their work. They understand they are the products of Christian formation, but they also know their job has its big days and special moments when they are unavoidably *on*. Like other professionals, they can step in and out of a role as easily as entering and exiting the sanctuary. But in the last analysis, the pastoral character does some-

⁷Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 31. For a fuller discussion of this theme see Richard Lischer, *The End of Words* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

thing more ambitious than teach about Christian vocation. The pastor serves as a paradigm-pastor, or model, for the service, worship, and explicit acknowledgment of God that is meant to characterize the vocation of all believers. It's not better performances the church needs, but truer characters.

THE AWKWARDNESS OF THE WORD

The ministry of the word offers stiff resistance to the professionalizing of the pastoral office. The very act of proclamation entails a dying to self-important credentials and a rising toward radical hope and discipleship. Unlike other ministries such as counseling or social justice, the ministry of proclamation does not have a compelling analogue among the professions. It sticks out among activities with proven social utility. Abraham Heschel reminds us that the prophetic pitch is always about an octave too high for the rest of society. Indeed, the word "prophet" may come from the root "to slaver," "to foam at the mouth." Prophets shriek at outrages the world takes for granted. They shudder before realities most of us cannot imagine.⁸ Preachers, too, brandish "truth" like a light-saber, making outrageous claims that can only offend against the tolerance of a pluralistic society. They wade into the 6,000 or so messages to which the average American is subjected every day and claim for their own the status of divine truth.

Despite the inherent tensions of ministry, however, a recent *Pulpit & Pew* survey of ministers found the great majority reporting "high levels of satisfaction" in their work.⁹ Contrary to the popular image of the Angst-torn Protestant clergyman (see, for example, John Updike, Flannery O'Connor, and James Baldwin), most of those surveyed seemed rather happy in the ministry. And yet, seventy percent of the "satisfied" clergy identified the problem of reaching people with the gospel as one of their most difficult challenges. The research has not yet explained how clergy who are so satisfied in their vocation can harbor so great an uneasiness about its central task.

The pastor who was once the most learned and eloquent figure in the village now suffers from faltering confidence. In Colonial New England the minister was the arbiter of religious laws and social mores. The Sunday sermon was the cultural equivalent of *The Sopranos*. These qualities no doubt contributed to the heightened view of the pastoral office. Today's pastors can no longer claim intellectual or rhetorical preeminence among their parishioners, a fact that doubtless contributes to a sense of inadequacy among the clergy. We minister to well-schooled people who have been shaped by democratic and pragmatic traditions. They are accustomed to

⁸Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), I, 3; II, 186–88.

⁹*Pulpit & Pew* Research on Pastoral Leadership, "Selected Findings from the National Clergy Survey," unpublished summary, p. 1.

being their own arbiters in everything. Moreover, today's minister has a lot of rhetorical competition. We labor in a vast theater of information presided over by professional communicators who are smoother, sharper, funnier, and more fluent than the local preacher. Their messages are flawlessly conveyed without notes or emotional investment in a style of effortless familiarity. The minister looks positively rough in comparison.

PAUL'S PARADIGM FOR MINISTRY

These and other cultural observations can distract us from a theological (as opposed to sociological) appraisal of the ministry. Paul understood the ministry as an extension of Christ's death and resurrection. It therefore entails a daily dying to those qualities coveted most by our culture and a daily rising to Christ's astonishing presence among us.

With his cruciform view of ministry, it makes sense for Paul to exhort his congregations not to "lose heart." The heartaches of ministry do not derive from the cultural climate in which it is practiced. They are not extrinsic to the ministry. Both the sorrows and the joys are caused by the ministry itself. They occur as the inevitable byproducts of a community's (and its leader's) organic connection to the death and resurrection of the Lord. No one who says, "I have been crucified with Christ" can attribute her ultimate plight or triumph to the socio-political context in which she happens to practice ministry.

FREEDOM FOR MINISTRY

The cruciform theology of ministry at first seems a burden to the pastor. But in reality it sets the minister free from the conventional norms of success, numbers, happiness, or power. An emphasis on cross and resurrection is not the source of the minister's maceration. It is his means of deliverance from it. It offers a center of gravity not available to would-be therapists or managers; it provides a vital and enduring form to random clerical activities. A pastor is a generalist not because he or she is a member of a generally helpful profession, but because the crucified and risen One has set the pastor free to apply the gospel in any and every circumstance. Freedom for ministry (to borrow the title of Richard Neuhaus's fine book)¹⁰ comes from the redemption accomplished in Jesus Christ. Thanks to him, the call we hear is not only "Where art thou?" but "Follow me." If we go no farther than the original challenge to our vocation, "Where art thou?" we will keep our collective noses clean in safe and conventional ministries. The call from the crucified One, however, leads us on a road whose end cannot be clearly seen.

To be a pastor is to be blessedly free of specialization. This is evident from pastors' reading,

¹⁰Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992 [1979]).

which includes biography, literature, history, and the social sciences. It is also apparent from the range of their activities and the flexibility of their schedules. One day the pastor counsels in a family conflict, visits in the hospital, helps paint the soup kitchen, and works on a sermon. The next day she attends a meeting in the mayor's office, teaches two classes, plans a stewardship campaign, and keeps working on the sermon. Every day he meditates on the Scripture, reads a few pages of *something*, prays for his congregation—and tries to work out the sermon.

The pastoral office brings with it the burdens of intimacy. Sometimes when pastors look tired it's because they know too much about their parishioners. They know more than they ever wanted to know about the emotional, financial, or sexual lives of people they love and respect. They weep with those who weep and attend more than their share of wedding receptions. The pastor has entrée into the homes of parishioners and is as likely to render pastoral care around the kitchen table as in a book-lined study. The extraordinary intimacy of pastoral relationships can create trust like no other profession. It is a reflection of the shepherd's love for his sheep and the sheep's trust in the shepherd. It also makes the pastoral office vulnerable to predators and abusers, characterized in the Fourth Gospel as thieves who come to steal and destroy.

Freedom for ministry only flourishes by means of the proclamation of the word of God and the administration of the sacraments. If a congregation can be said to have a soul, it may be found there, in its devotion to word and sacrament. From this fused center an entire world of discourse, traditionally known as pastoral conversation, opens to the minister. It entails not merely "contacts in the community" but opportunities for in-depth relationships nurtured by God's gracious acts in Jesus Christ. And administration, so despised by the high-minded and neglected by the seminaries, takes on real meaning when it is understood as an extension of the most important administrative work of all, the administration of the sacraments. The unproductive hours and busy work that all pastors complain of can be traced to the broken connection between administration as a secular tool and the administration of word and sacraments as a spiritual discipline. Pastoral administration, or stewardship, begins with stewardship of God's mysteries.

VOCATION IN CONGREGATION

In the *Pulpit & Pew* report mentioned above, when pastors were asked what they needed help with most, they did not identify their own intellectual or spiritual needs. Their comments had to do with promoting the congregation's vision, administering its work, and training

members to exercise their own ministries. In other words, a majority of those surveyed clearly understands the ultimate purpose of the pastoral vocation.

When pastors are trained in seminary, there is so much to learn and so many skills to be practiced, they become unwitting participants in a multi-year program of clerical socialization. We professors are so intent on forming a ministerial identity in them, we often forget what ministerial identity is for. Its purpose is not to exalt the ministry above other vocations or to promote the superiority of the ordained. How discouraging it must be for the audience when most of the sermon's good examples are drawn from the lives of the clergy!

There may be a carpenter or a physical therapist in this congregation who need to hear that their lives are called too. They are learning to acknowledge that their skills are gifts from God and their work can be done to the glory of God. What they bring to the body of Christ helps knit that body into a coherent whole. It is the pastor's vocation to teach, counsel, and preach this vision of coherence. The pastor trains others to witness to Jesus Christ in the course of their worldly vocations. We never stop asking Bonhoeffer's question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" to which we may add the qualifiers, "in our work," "in our politics," and "in our relationships."

This enhancement of vocations entails a developed appreciation for the unique qualities of the congregation. A congregation is not a special interest group or a club but a company of callings in which members test and encourage one another. A congregation is made up of people who have pledged to make their life's journey together. They have bound themselves together for the purpose of discerning God's claim upon their lives. This is an epic voyage of discovery that begins when the minister makes the sign of the cross over the child at the baptismal font and ends with the same sign on the coffin.

If a pastor is to encourage the vocation of this body, she must speak its language and learn from its faith. The minister is not merely an accidental tourist passing through the congregation on the way to a better appointment. She is joining the group, which entails an intense, post-graduate education in every dimension of her members' lives. Every day, ministers are encountering examples of faith more mature and more experienced than their own. Such faith should be internalized by the pastor and not merely translated into a sermon illustration. Joining, really *joining*, a congregation means learning how to teach and preach in such a way that the faith-language of the congregation is incorporated into the *lingua sacra* of Bible class and sermon. But, as the ministers surveyed by *Pulpit & Pew* asked, How can we communicate God's presence in this difficult world?

THE LAUNDROMAT PRIEST

There was a priest in eastern North Carolina whose superiors assigned him to serve the growing Hispanic population in that part of the state. What to do? How to proceed? Should one first do a socio-economic profile of the county? Or perhaps read several books on liberation theology? What the priest chose to do was this: One Sunday afternoon he went to a laundromat frequented by Mexican workers and set up a small table. On the table he placed a hand-woven blanket and some bread and wine. That afternoon he said mass for five or six people. The numbers grew modestly until soon many were gathering there from various parts of the county.

On some Sundays, the congregants take advantage of a short break in the mass to transfer their clothes from the washers to the dryers. But lately, many of the regulars arrive without their laundry bags. They've come to worship." They stand respectfully toward the rear of the washerette, as if occupying holy ground.¹¹

Is the laundromat priest engaged in a postmodern, ad hoc ministry, what in the 1960s we would have called a "ministry of presence," or is he operating from an explicit theological center? Is he a maverick or a traditionalist? Where does his freedom come from?

His mission activity appears to be a strategy for starting up a ministry, but in terms of the themes explored in this essay he is actually fulfilling the purpose of ministry by completing the circuit of vocations, a circuit that includes his call, the people's work, and the extraordinary presence of Jesus Christ in a work-a-day setting.

The priest is practicing the ministry of reconciliation at its most profound level. For as a servant of the word he is effecting a meeting between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the realities of human existence. In this ministry all the calls converge: the cries of the people, the murmur of his own life, the voice of the church, and the call of God. That it happens quietly among poor people and in an ordinary place is not incidental to the story, but typical of God's grace and the Lord's own freedom for ministry in the world.

¹¹"Padre Pablo and the Washerette Mass," *Raleigh News & Observer*, E, September 5, 1997.



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