

REFLECTING ON MINISTRY: AN ONLINE RETREAT

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Thesis Thirteen: Ministry Is Being Ministered To

It is important to acknowledge right away that this thesis could be interpreted in a very dangerous way. Ministry is about *service*, and no other motive is a worthy one for entrance into it. There are ministers, however, who do indeed manipulate others to serve their spiritual, emotional and even material needs. This is not what this thesis proposes.

I mean this thesis, rather, in several other senses. In the first place, the minister is not outside the Christian community, and therefore not exempt from the ministry of others. In fact, a good minister is one who himself or herself has been and continues to be nourished, inspired and healed by the ministry of others--for example through preaching, participation in the sacrament of reconciliation, spiritual direction, continuing education, communal theological reflection. The evangelizer, to echo Pope Paul VI, must first and constantly be evangelized.¹

Second, as connects with aspects of Thesis Twelve, openness to the truly otherness and uniqueness of a person or persons in a way that they are not simply *objects* of one's ministrations does honor to those persons and has the effect of enlarging one's own self. My colleague Claude Marie Barbour has named this kind of ministry "mission in reverse," and insists that a great part of ministry is allowing oneself to be challenged, inspired and transformed by the people among whom one lives and ministers. It is like becoming a child once again, allowing one to be taught by others. True ministry passes through a stage of "liminality" as one passes over to the other, and only when one has passed over can one begin to contribute positively. And yet that respectful presence and openness is already a ministry, reflective of the God that blesses and loves with God's mere presence. As one engages in such "mission in reverse," the minister is stretched and changed. As Edward Poitras that "in authentic Christian mission, any self will be transformed, most likely continually transformed, into another kind of self. The self grows and enlarges, and in that process all that comprises the self is renewed and transformed."² Both Barbour and Poitras write in the context of cross-cultural ministry, but it seems equally valid to think of "mission in reverse" as an integral part of any ministry, as one faces the wonder and uniqueness of the Other, and reaches out with hospitality and waits with patience in the face of human freedom.

Finally, being ministered to occurs in the context of the minister's own weakness and vulnerability. As I have said, this can be extremely dangerous and unhealthy, but at the same time every minister knows that there are times when, as one ministers to others, one receives more than one is possibly able to give. As a minister listens to a person struggling with issues of sexuality, for example, the person's honesty and integrity might challenge the minister to deeper honesty and integrity in his or her own life; as one ministers in a situation of poverty, one may be touched in powerful and transforming ways by the faith, warmth and authentic humanity of the people. Even accepting the invitation of a person or a family to dinner--and being a grateful guest--can be a very effective ministry to the hosts! Despite the dangers involved in being ministered to, the fact remains that ministers are more often than not "wounded healers," and are healed as they themselves engage in healing.

Thesis Fourteen: Ministry is "Convivence"

The awkward word "convivence" in this final thesis is the English translation of the German "Konvivenz," the term that missiologist Theo Sundermeier uses to express the essence of mission or ministry today. The mark of Jesus' ministry and life, he says, was not so much *pro*-existence (life *for* others) as it was con-vivence (life *with* others); "Jesus was not 'the man for others' . . . but the man 'with' others."³ Jesus' ministry was one lived out in solidarity with people, really "dwelling" among them (see Jn 1:14), sharing peoples' lives, *including* the *excluded*, enjoying common meals, valuing friendship. It is no accident that one of Jesus' favorite images of God's Reign was a banquet, and that Christians' primary way of experiencing Jesus' presence has always the "breaking of the bread" (Lk 24:35; Acts 2:42). Like Jesus' ministry, The "being with" that is basic to Christian ministry grounds every kind of "being for."

Ministry is lived out, then, by "passing over" into the lives of others. It entails both leaving and arriving--leaving behind what is familiar and comfortable and learning to "bond" with the people and situation in which one serves. In today's world of multicultural parishes, this may mean attempting to understand, appreciate and learn from the manifold cultural and ethnic groups who are making our parishes today truly *Catholic*. It may mean living

in the midst of those who are poor and accompanying them as they begin to realize their own power to change their neighborhoods or working situations. It may mean that ministers who are men need to learn more about women, and ministers who are women need to learn more about men. It may mean leaving behind stereotypical views of the elderly, of "Generation X," of the disabled, and opening up to the richness than each of these social locations can offer. It may mean committing oneself to the asceticism of learning another language well, and becoming passing fair in one or two others. Ministry means sharing Jesus' ministry, as I insisted in Thesis One, and his is a ministry of both letting go and taking on (Phil 2:6-7).

Conclusion

The purpose of these reflections has been to help readers come to a more comprehensive understanding of Christian ministry. Because all Christians are called to serve, Christian ministry has a wide range; Christians engage in authentic ministry when they greet people at the entrance to church on a Sunday morning, when they lobby for more human labor policies in global companies, when they take communion to elderly shut-ins, when they lead a community assembled for Eucharist, when they struggle to understand and appreciate another culture. Some of the theses I have proposed here may have more relevance to particular ministries than to others--the men and women who take up the collection every Sunday may not necessarily have to cross cultures or be attentive to eco-justice issues, for example. Nevertheless, each one of these fourteen theses have *some* relevance, I believe, to every ministry which Christians engage in. I propose them as a kind of grid by which every minister can come to a deeper appreciation of his or her work of service in the church. No ministry is unimportant; all ministry is the ministry of Christ. Every Christian ministry has a depth that needs to be appreciated.

Of course, there may be other theses. These fourteen are only suggestive, and if readers would like to add to them I encourage them to do so. These theses are like facets which reveal the beauty of Christian ministry; that beauty can only be enhanced by more.

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1. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #15.

2. Edward W. Poitras, "The Self of Mission," *Mission Studies*, XIV, 1 and 2--27/28 (1997): 26. For "Mission in Reverse," see Claude Marie Barbour, Kathleen Billman, Peggy DesJarlait and Eleanor Doidge, "Ministry on the Boundaries: Cooperation without Exploitation," in Susan B. Thistlethwaite and George F. Cairns, eds., *Beyond Theological Tourism: Menoring as a Grassroots Approach to Theological Education* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 82-83.

3. Theo Sundermeier, "Theology of Mission," in K. Müller, T. Sunderemier, S. Bevans and R. Bliese, eds., *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), pp. 439 and 441; quotation on p. 441.