

REFLECTING ON MINISTRY: AN ONLINE RETREAT

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Thesis Nine: Christian Ministry Is Praxis

By the term “praxis” I do not mean to offer a more sophisticated word for “practice” or “activity.” Praxis, as it has come to be understood first in liberation theology and then, more generally, in the discipline of “practical theology,” has a more technical meaning. Praxis includes both critical, theoretical thinking and deliberative action; it is a dialectic of both theory and practice in which action calls forth questions to be thought through so as to result in more effective and more Christian action. It is reflection upon reflected-upon experience. Praxis “attempts to overcome the shortcomings of both unreflective activity and reflection that does not intend transformative action. Action is never self-explanatory; theory provides an understanding of action. Theory, in formulating the goals sought and the means to bring them about, also anticipates and predetermines action. Action . . . needs theory to be effective. And only when theory leads to objective transformation of the world does it constitute praxis.”¹

My point is that one ministers not only by *doing*, but also by *reflecting*. Taking time for reading, evaluating, thinking theologically about a particular experience of ministry, sharing reflectively with colleagues, praying an issue through--these are not moments *outside* of ministry, but an integral part of it. These are not activities that one does to *prepare* for ministry, or *after* it; they are a constitutive part of ministry, and without them ministry doesn't really exist. That ministry is praxis, I believe, has three implications.

First, being a *person* of praxis is a *sine qua non* of the minister, for it provides both “roots and wings”--roots that anchor one's ministry in the tradition, reasonability and the community's wisdom, and wings that open one's ministry to even more creative and gospel-inspired action. In addition, these roots and wings guard against one of the great dangers of ministry: burnout. As the minister takes time to reflect, read, evaluate, pray, share and reformulate he or she has time to be refreshed by new ideas, by the affirmation or wisdom of colleagues, by the power of the Word or the Spirit. And as the minister undertakes new ways of action, or experiences the excitement of taking new risks for the sake of the gospel, he or she will not be prey to boredom or discouragement. One's ministry can always be fulfilled in better ways, with sharper focus, with more theological depth, with more attentiveness. Praxis is an unending spiral that constantly allows ministers to be nourished by the riches of the tradition, and nourished as well by fresh and grounded action.

Second, praxis forms a major element of what ministry aims to do within the Christian community and, indeed, within the wider world. To paraphrase an idea that Eugene Kennedy developed a number of years ago, the minister is a “theological person.”² The minister, in other words, has as one of his or her main tasks the service of interpreting people's lives in the light of God's word and the vast Christian tradition--helping Christians understand their lives against a background of faith, and helping them live more consciously in terms of their faith, or providing a way for anyone to interpret their lives vis-a-vis the Christian “symbol system.” As people experience the ecstasy of falling in love, the pain of struggling with death and disease, the challenge and frustration of leaving home as young adults, the emptiness involved adjusting to divorce, the uncertainty of wrestling with unbelief, the minister is the one who connects *their* story with *The* story, who reveals the sacredness in the ordinary and extraordinary events of their lives, who assists in “excavating” the presence of God's Spirit, both in their accomplishments and in their failures. What Henri Nouwen says specifically of Christian *leaders* can be said equally of Christian *ministers*: that in the future they will have to be theologians, “persons who know the heart of God and are trained--through prayer, study, and careful analysis--to manifest the divine event of God's saving work in the midst of the many seemingly random events of their time.”³

Third, the minister's task is not only to theologize *for* or *with* people; ministry is also about helping people--fellow Christians or others with whom they come in contact--learn to engage in praxis themselves. Particularly in terms of the Christian community within which they serve, ministers need to be convinced that every person of faith--as he or she attempts to express it, or deepen it, or even articulate doubts about it--is *already* theologizing. Every Christian, as Howard Stone and James Duke put it, lives out of an implicit, “embedded” theology; Christian faith can grow, however, as what is “embedded” becomes more “deliberative,” as Christians at the grassroots level learn some of the basic movements and techniques of thinking in a way that connects and correlates personal experience with the wider Christian tradition.⁴ This task of helping people to think theologically, helping people to gain confidence in interpreting their experience and activity in the light of their faith and the faith of the church, may be--in the words of Patricia Killen-- “the single most significant work of the contemporary pastoral minister and religious educator.”⁵ Ministry, and indeed Christian life, is not just action; it constantly calls for deliberate, clear,

and focused reflection and conversation.

Thesis Ten: Christian Ministry Is Done in Prayer

Intimately connected with the praxis dimension of ministry, as I have already mentioned above, is that ministry is activity surrounded and suffused by prayer--after all, the original meaning of the word 'theology' was 'union with God in prayer.'⁶ The minister's identity is rooted in his or her relationship to Christ, and for that relationship to be vital the "lines of communication" always need to be open. How and when this communication takes place is at least partly a matter of personal discernment--I say *partly* because some aspects of ministerial prayer life, like Eucharist and Bible reading, can hardly be based personal preferences--but *that* time for prayer is part of a minister's life is beyond question. One can hardly serve, let alone weather the misunderstandings, the failures and the frustrations involved in a life of ministry, if one does not often drink from the well of genuine prayer. And without the openness and emptiness that true prayer provides, ministers can hardly be prepared for the unexpected and surprising that regularly crosses the path of the person who tries to continue the work of the one who was so intensely guided by the Spirit.

Again, the style of prayer is partly a very personal thing, but I believe George Niederauer provides a helpful image of the *kind* of prayer that every minister needs to open him/herself up to when he speaks about the struggle in prayer as a "Tale of Two Benches," the bus bench and the park bench. When we sit on the bus bench, we are full of expectations. We are not there just to be there; we are there to wait for the bus. Our hope is that our stay there will be as brief as possible; so not to waste time we bring along something to read; we are annoyed when the bus does not arrive according to the published schedule. This is in quite a contrast to time spent on a park bench. We are there just to be there, to rest, to feel the sun and the breeze, to smell the fragrance of freshly cut grass, or to delight our eyes with the dazzling color of a bed of flowers. Niederauer's guess is that probably ninety percent of our prayer is the "bus bench" variety, but insists that the essence of prayer is much more like sitting on the park bench. "When we inveterate bus benchers come to it, we can too easily arrive with our bus bench expectations; then frustration is a likely result. Over and over we must make the difficult but essential choice to let go of such expectations and let the Lord lead us to the park."⁷

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1. Ismael García, "Praxis," in Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), pp. 377-378.

2. Eugene Kennedy, *Comfort My People: The Pastoral Presence of the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), pp. 137-151. Kennedy spoke of the *priest* as "theological person," but I think this is equally applicable to any Christian minister.

3. Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), p. 68.

4. Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How To Think Theologically* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 11-24.

5. Patricia O'Connell Killen, "Assisting Adults to Think Theologically," *PACE*, 22: 7.

6. This is at least the opinion of Henri Nouwen in *In the Name of Jesus*, p. 30.

7. George Niederauer, "A Ministerial Spirituality: Reflections on Priesthood," in Karen Sue Smith, ed., *Priesthood in the Modern World* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1999), p. 71. Once again in this essay the

focus is on priesthood, but as is so often the case, the validity of the point the author makes can be extended to *all* ministerial spirituality.