

PASTORAL COMMUNITY AS SOURCE OF THEOLOGY

The purpose of the workshop was to identify specific issues within a variety of pastoral communities, particularly those which affect the faith-sacrament relationship, and to explore how this pastoral practice functions as a source for theological reflection. Each of the panelists gave a brief description of the local community in which he or she ministers, identified major issues and tensions, and posed questions for discussion with the workshop participants.

Robert Duggan, of Gaithersburg, Maryland, spoke from the context of a large suburban parish of about 1,500 families, of which he is pastor. The parish community is involved in a five year pastoral planning process, which established the development of a deeper spiritual life as a first priority. This value seems to translate itself into a movement toward a more intentional style of faith community that asks for a stronger commitment and more accountability on the part of its members. Concretely this value is evident in the communal celebration of initiation, the investment of the community in sacramental preparation, and the self-definition of the parish as a community of welcome and reconciliation.

The parish also includes a large number of young couples ending their "young adult sabbatical" who request baptism for their children but who themselves are of marginal faith/practice. The dynamics within the community call for reflection on several levels: ecclesiological (What does membership mean?); liturgical-sacramental (How does ritual give meaning?); and faith (What does it mean to be a believer?). The task is to maintain and foster dialogue on several levels: pastoral care of individuals; development of staff/leadership, particularly the volunteers; the larger community of the parish; and the "Sunday Catholics." The challenge: What is the role of the pastoral community of St. Rose in the process of dialogue and how to experience this in a way that allows for a healthy evolution of the dynamics of community life and pastoral care?

Julia Upton, Associate Professor of Theology at St. John's University, noted that St. John's is not one pastoral community but rather many communities. For example, there are the communities of colleagues/staff, the students in the classes, and "The Sunday Worship Group" (many of whom come to the campus liturgy because of a sense of alienation from their own parish). Julia focused primarily on her ministry as teacher and described her approach in the area of reconciliation. She begins each new area of study by "collecting experiences" and providing a locus in which the students can tell their story. Many of the students are uncatechized and for many religion has little connection with life. Many students lack a sense of history and assume that current practice has always been valid and customary. Through campus ministry it is important to provide opportunities for prayer and worship, particularly rituals of reconciliation, in order that intellectual formation can be complemented by experiences of prayer and worship.

Sam Miglarese spoke out of his experience as a vicar general of the diocese of Charleston and pastor of the cathedral. He began by contrasting management and leadership. Management asks: "How do you get it to work?" Leadership asks: "Where do you want it to go?" Leadership sets a direction which is based on a vision and this vision is based on certain commitments and experiences. The tension lies in the fact that the theological reflection integral to leadership is overwhelmed by various issues and controversies such as sensitive personnel matters, school closings, public ethical issues, legal concerns and diocesan restructuring. Responding to the situations and to the public reaction often become so time and energy consuming that management prevails over leadership. The challenge is to look at those conflicts and controversies in the light of faith and to explore what meaning they might have for the life of this pastoral community. Faith seeking understanding presumes a listening; it presumes a commitment on the part of the bishop and diocesan personnel to promote this kind of reflection; and it presumes a conviction that the pastoral community is a source of reflection. The question posed to the workshop participants for discussion was: How does this pastoral reflection happen? What does a diocese look like when the pastoral community is truly a source of theological reflection?

In his remarks, Ronald Chochol, Director of Continuing Formation for Priests in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, focused on the role of the presider/priest in the assembly/pastoral community from the perspective of foundational theology. Chochol began with the contemporary experience of many priests as the starting point for theological reflection on ordained ministry and on the place of the ordained minister within the pastoral community. He used the images of silent symbols, displaced symbols and broken symbols to describe the self-understanding of many priests today. Many priests are silent about the religious and moral dimensions of sexuality and family planning, and about the sexual meaning of celibacy; feel displaced because leadership goes on elsewhere since the lives of the people go on elsewhere; are broken or demoralized because of the growing shortage of priests and the implications for ministry of widely publicized sexual transgressions of priests, negative ideas about clergy, and the expectation to enforce law over spirit. Questions arising from this situation: What do all of these experiences mean for the minister's own faith and conversion? How do priests perceive themselves within the community and how does the community perceive them? How does the priest move from silence to listening? From displacement to collaboration? From brokenness to authenticity?

Out of their own diverse experiences, participants responded to the various questions raised by the panelists and noted that although panelists spoke out of different pastoral situations, several common themes were apparent. They identified, first, the reality and the challenge of uncatechized adults; second, an identity question for the community (What does membership mean?) and for the ordained minister (What does leadership mean?); and third, how to insure that the whole community realizes responsibility for the formation of new members and for the quality of the Christian life. Participants supported continuing the conversation between theology and pastoral practice within the context of the CTSA meetings.

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