Theological Trends

Lay pastoral theology

Fostering spiritual adulthood in a priest-short Church

Michael P. Horan

Introduction

IN MANY PARTS OF THE CATHOLIC WORLD there is concern over the 'shortage' of priests, or at least there is recognition that there are fewer priests to serve today's Catholics than there were thirty years ago. This essay focuses on the people who are taking their places. Lay persons are assuming responsibilities formerly assigned to priests and they are growing in their identity and their competence as pastoral theologians. Using the Catholic Church in the United States as one case, I will consider the ways in which the presence of this group refines and enriches the very meaning of pastoral theology. Then I will examine three ways in which the Church might respond to the needs of the pastoral leaders, in order that the church members as well as its new leaders may grow toward spiritual adulthood.

Who are the lay pastoral theologians? stories and statistics

Ann owns a small farm in St Joseph, Minnesota, a rural midwestern area of the United States, and she has worked that farm with her husband Phil. Together they have raised two children who are now young adults. Ann began church work nine years ago as a volunteer, when her son Billy was preparing for first eucharist. Gradually she moved into full-time pastoral leadership in religious education under the tutelage of Fr George, who was the pastor and only priest at the parish. After Fr George was assigned to serve several parishes in the area, the diocese announced an opening for a position as a 'pastoral associate' in her parish. Ann applied and gained the position.

Ann's pastoral responsibilities include co-ordinating the healing and bereavement team members who visit the community hospital and the two nursing homes, supervising the RCIA team (Rite of

Christian Initiation of Adults) and the part-time liturgy director, the volunteer youth co-ordinators and the parish budget committee. Sometimes Ann is overwhelmed by her duties and she is humbled by her lack of preparation for the many tasks before her. Ann's mother often remarks proudly that she never thought she would live to see the day when her daughter, a cradle Catholic, would become a minister while remaining a Catholic. But she has.

Ann's story represents a growing trend in the Church in the United States that several statistical studies validate. Many pastoral theologians work in schools and hospitals and other settings that have customarily employed lay persons. The parish setting, by contrast, is a relatively new arena for displaying the talent of lay persons. These pastoral theologians function as general ministers as well as liturgists, youth ministers, bereavement ministers, and in other roles. The surveys about lay leaders expose two important movements that affect pastoral theology: the laicization of pastoral theology and the feminization of pastoral ministry. A consideration of these surveys lets us mine the depths of the terrain of pastoral theology and draw resources for considering its present challenges and future directions.

Three important studies of lay pastoral ministers in the United States have been published in the last five years through the National Pastoral Life Center, the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry and the CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) Ministry Formation Directory.

In 1992 Philip Murnion, a priest of the archdiocese of New York, led a study that was supported by finances from the Lilly Endowment and the efforts of a committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States.[1] The study, which examines laity and religious personnel on parish staffs in the United States, was published in 1992 by the National Pastoral Life Center, an organization headed by Murnion. According to the summary of the study, approximately half of the 19,000 parishes in the United States employ about 20,000 lay people and religious at least twenty hours per week.[2] Of pastoral ministers in the parishes 60 per cent are lay; 85 per cent are women. Murnion's work reports on the level of education of the parish ministers, noting that 76 per cent of the vowed religious sisters and brothers have completed university and graduate school, while only 30 per cent of the lay men and women have the same level of education.

A second study, by Barbara Fleischer, deals directly with the education of lay pastoral theologians. Fleischer's text results from the efforts of the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry, a consortium of Catholic universities, and the financial gift of the Lilly Endowment.[3] It offers details about the attitudes and needs of lay ministry graduate students who are studying pastoral theology in Catholic seminaries and universities in the United States.

Fleischer compares the number of incoming students with the number of graduating students in order to illustrate the rapid growth in lay pastoral theologians and church personnel. Some of the significant results, which were published in 1993, include the following: 73 per cent of the incoming graduate students were lay persons, an increase from the 56 per cent of the graduating students who were lay. Conversely, the student population of vowed religious was only 17 per cent for the incoming students, but 33 per cent for the graduating students. This decline in the number of vowed religious represented in graduate schools makes sense when considered alongside the larger trend of a 45 per cent decrease in the number of vowed religious in the United States in the past thirty years. This suggests that an increasing number of lay pastoral theologians are engaged in graduate study and are likely to be awarded degrees within five years. But the study also shows the troubling news that 47 per cent of graduate school funding came from the personal or family resources of lay persons who were beginning studies in 1993, an increase of 15 per cent over the responses of the students who were finishing their graduate studies. Members of religious orders were more likely to count on greater financial support from their communities. The lay students could not rely upon their parishes or dioceses in the same way.[4]

A third survey, the 1997 *Catholic ministry formation directory*, sponsored by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Washington, DC, and edited by Brian T. Froehle, draws upon data from people who administer programmes in pastoral theology and pastoral ministry in seminaries, universities and diocesan institutes.[5] It yields the following conclusions: 60 per cent of the students are lay women, 68 per cent are white, 64 per cent are under the age of 50 (30 per cent are 21 to 39 years of age; 34 per cent in their forties).[6] More than half the university- and diocesan-based programmes are held in evening sessions, enabling the students to have full-time employment while studying. Of diocesan-based programmes 45 per cent are held in parish settings.[7]

To summarize: we can answer the question 'who are the pastoral theologians?' by noting that they are white women in their early middle age, married and becoming educated in theology. They study pastoral theology in a variety of settings, making sacrifices of time and finances in order to meet tuition costs. There are fewer vowed religious and seminarians, whose membership has decreased significantly in the decades since pastoral theology ceased to be regarded exclusively as a seminary subject.

How have they affected pastoral theology?

Only in recent years have the terms 'pastoral ministry' and 'pastoral theology' come in to common use by lay Catholics. In the pre-conciliar world of theological study, pastoral theology referred to a course that was offered in the seminary (often just prior to ordination to priesthood) that treated selected pastoral issues and challenges that the young priest might encounter. Pastoral theology courses often provided some techniques for solving problems. In effect, pastoral theology functioned as the 'delivery system' of real theology; that is, it offered a forum and sometimes a method for the application of serious (e.g. dogmatic) theology. The synonymous term 'applied theology' also communicates a similar dynamic which was at work when pastors took their theology to pastoral situations.[8]

Today, lay persons engage in pastoral theology in a variety of contexts, illustrated by the story of Ann and the statistics of Murnion, Fleischer and Froehle. It is well known that lay persons assume positions in Catholic hospitals, universities and social agencies, as administrators, advocates and community organizers. But the arrival of lay pastoral theologians in positions of leadership in *parish* settings constitutes a new moment and presents new challenges to a church that seeks to grow toward spiritual adulthood. What can the presence of lay pastoral theologians disclose to the Church about the nature of theology in general? And how can the activity of pastoral theologians help to foster spiritual adulthood in the Church?

Pastoral theology as contextual theology

Theologies that arise out of particular contexts were announced to the theological world from the third world experience of pastoral theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez. Committed to the liberating power of the gospel, Gutiérrez, who is pastor to a church in a slum

in Lima, began with the human experience of economic and social oppression and built 'a theology of liberation' from the shaky and scandalous foundation of human suffering.[9] As a starting point for reflection, Gutiérrez showed that the suffering of the oppressed and the social and economic causes of poverty can be analysed in light of the gospel's radiant power. Jesus' preferential option for the poor emerges from praxis, that is, from reflection on the Christian action that constitutes the gospel's response to oppression in this context.

Nearly thirty years have passed since Gutiérrez penned his programmatic work. Today the Church in the United States and other first world settings witnesses well-developed theologies of liberation arising from all parts of the world, including the first world. All expressions of contextual theologies carry the common message that theology, rightly understood, is not so much universal and unequivocal language about God as particular, tentatively uttered human speech that strains for words about the experience of God. The experience is filtered and informed by the cultural, historical, economic, gender and class conditions of its speakers and its hearers.[10] The experience cannot be understood nor can it actually disclose the divine within that experience without giving full attention to the context. Contextual theologies take note that human experience is often marred by suffering, sometimes at the hands of people who do not know the pain that their way inflicts. Worse is the suspicion that, even were the people who oppress to know that their way of life oppresses others, they might prefer to ignore the fact.

Emerging from the experience of sexism in society (and sadly, in the Church), the feminist context contributes a *contextual* theology in so far as it attends to the ways in which attitudes, structures, assumptions and behaviour held by some men and women can spawn oppression of all women. Within the realm of pastoral theology, the surveys identifying the new pastoral theologians signal the feminization of ministry and offer a starting point for a feminist/contextual pastoral theology.

Lay women are effecting a dramatic impact on the spiritual life of Catholic communities of faith and the institutions associated with them. And feminist theologies arise out of the particular experiences of sexism that can be chronicled and analysed by those who know the experience best. The problem of sexism in the Catholic Church pervades every facet of ecclesial life, yet the ministry experience of women remains a story told largely in isolated anecdotes. Ruth Wallace's study of Catholic women pastors in the rural regions of

the United States ends with recommendations for the smoother introduction of women pastoral leaders in the Catholic parish.[11] Wallace recommends the involvement of lay persons in the recruitment of lay pastors, and the establishment of mentor programmes between ordained clergy and lay pastoral leaders.[12] She recommends these steps as a way to face and remedy the resistance by members and clergy to Catholic women pastors. Wallace shows that at this time of transition the unprecedented role of lay women in leadership offers challenges to parishioners to understand ministry in fresh ways; the very presence of new lay leaders can foster the growth of new theological understandings.

Like liberation and feminist theologies, pastoral theology claims the experience of the human subject as its starting point. One method for pastoral theology that has been particularly popular in the United States is based on the 'praxis' approach of contemporary contextual theologies. Thomas Groome likens pastoral theology to the movements of shared Christian praxis. Using Aristotelian notions as critical and refreshing reflection, Groome outlines a method in five 'moments' composed of moves from naming the present action to critical reflection on that action, in order to hear the story of Christianity with new ears and thus to pave the way toward conversation in which the participant's 'story' meets in dialectical encounter with the Christian 'story'. According to Groome, this method of theological reflection leads finally to decision and enriched action.[13] Groome's use of praxis helps to clarify the goals and illumine a method that enriches pastoral reflection. More for its method than for its goals, Groome's work has been widely incorporated in religious education practice and text books and catechetical programmes in schools and churches throughout the United States. Many pastoral leaders are familiar with Groome's approach, which treats the ministries of liturgy, religious education, preaching, justice and peace, and pastoral counselling under the umbrella of pastoral theology. Groome's approach provides a good starting point for understanding pastoral theology as contextual theology, that is, as critical reflection on the activity of sharing faith.

Pastoral theology can and should be further presented and understood as a contextual theology for two reasons. First, the experience of ministry itself is a particular *context* that can shed light on the nature, mission and challenges of living the gospel. The light could assist all the members as well as the lay pastoral leaders and the ordained pastoral leaders on their common journey towards effective

contemporary expressions of Catholicism. Second, and perhaps less clear, is the potential of pastoral theology to become *liberating* theology. Lay people report that their context often carries with it challenges that may be related to *oppression from inside the Church.* Some church members and some clergy resist the change in church personnel that the statistical studies narrate.[14] The laicization and feminization of ministry appear to be both threatening and unsettling, as lay persons' and especially women's roles in pastoral theology and ministry enjoy increased importance and a heightened profile.

Fostering spiritual adulthood

The present 'crisis' of the Church as it faces the consequences of having a smaller number of priests to serve a growing Catholic population may be the opportunity to promote mature spirituality in the Catholic Church. Indeed, the changing face of pastoral theology and the needs of particular lay pastoral theologians can contribute to the flowering of adult spirituality in the Catholic Church in at least three ways: by the Church's support of pastoral theologians' formation; by the Church's financial support of pastoral leaders; by the Church's attention to pastoral theological insights as an object lesson for the whole of the Church's life.

Formation of ministers: fostering holistic growth

Since the establishment of a seminary system at the Council of Trent, the formation of seminarians for ordination has been marked by residential opportunities for education, peer interaction, prayer and support in the growth of identity and supervision in ministry skills. These features of seminary life have not always been perfect, but they have been consistently present. They stand as a four-centuries'-long witness to the Church's conviction that the preparation of pastoral leaders requires more than an academic course of study. New populations and new circumstances call for a transposition of these elements of seminary life into a very new key for the specific needs of lay ministers in training. Lay persons' training and support would be analogous, not identical, to the seminary model. The statistical surveys demonstrate that pastoral theologians are engaged in ministry and/or other full-time or part-time employment even as they study pastoral theology.

The formation of lay pastoral leaders obviously does not take place in a residential context. The variety of ages and the readiness of lay persons for spiritual direction, retreat experiences, prayer groups and the like require the discernment, creativity and care of diocesan and university leaders who understand the many differences between resident candidates for ordination and non-resident lay pastoral theologians. The Froehle/CARA study reports that diocesan-based centres devote 25 per cent of their curriculum to spiritual formation, while university programmes devote only 11 per cent.[15] This leaves the universities with the decision either to offer formative co-curricular experiences to their students, or to work together with dioceses for the total preparation of pastoral theologians. Whatever the setting, theories of religious formation can be helpful in clarifying the tasks.

One helpful theory is advanced by the religious education theorist John Westerhoff. Westerhoff suggests that *education* encourages adult spirituality, for it fosters both knowledge of the community's tradition and the skills for a healthy critique of that tradition.[16] But he distinguishes between *education* and *formation* and notes that the latter is marked by the kinds of experiences that expand the spirit and enhance the identity of the learner as one who respects the story of the community. For Westerhoff, *formation* fosters adulthood by providing exposure to the spiritual realm of the community's interactions, values and meanings; it communicates the community's soul. That kind of formation of ministers requires the support of a community's spiritual, liturgical, social and financial resources. The Church needs integrated, *whole* people as leaders, or else the Church suffers.

The challenge of paying a just wage to ministers

It is ironic that the Catholic Church's attention to issues of justice in the marketplace occurs alongside the fact that the same Church inadequately pays its ministers. In casual conversation at conventions and in university hallways, the pastoral theologian consistently reports that she is hard pressed to make ends meet. According to Murnion's study, the average salary for full-time employment of the general minister in 1992 was $15,130, barely above the poverty line for families of four in the United States. Youth ministers' and liturgists' salaries were reported to be better ($22,410 and $25,453 respectively).[17] Anecdotal data reveals that not much has changed in

the salary scale in the five years since Murnion's study was completed. Many students in the five university graduate programmes and three diocesan certification programmes with which I have been involved in the past ten years report that they can choose to respond to a call to minister because their spouses make more money than they do and thus together two people can support a family. A presumption here is that lay ministers are married. (In fact, two-thirds of the ministers surveyed in Murnion's study are married.) The structure of lay ministry payment needs serious reconsideration if all people, single, poor and middle class, are to be represented by its leaders. If the Catholic people and their leaders do not attend to this need, then an economic 'class' of ministers could emerge exclusively from households of married persons with sufficient income to support the involvement of one spouse. A contextual theology of ministry addressing the need for a just wage for ministers would constitute one important step forward by calling church members to assume responsibility for the financial support of their ministers.

Pastoral theology as a life lesson: living an adult spirituality of 'conjunction'

James Fowler has narrated the growth in faith of individuals by use of a linear and sequential model, and has concluded that spiritual adulthood is marked by a welcome of ambiguity.[18] Fowler shows that people move through a series of stages from infancy through to old age, in a way which is similar to Erik Erikson's stages of human development and Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of cognitive moral development. Fowler's numerous interviews with persons of various religious backgrounds demonstrate that stages can be neither ignored nor skipped. Fowler claims that adult faith is 'conjunctive' in style. Adult faith creates an internal structure that fosters trust in the goodness of reality *because of* (not in spite of) the ambiguities that beset the believer's life. A conjunctive style of faith is able to hold the ambiguities of life in seeming tension, without yielding to simplistic conclusions about that tension. For the believer with a conjunctive style of faith, the apparent ultimatum of an 'either/or' choice yields to a 'both/and' approach: God is both transcendent *and* immanent in the experience of prayer, truth is revealed in all religions *and* most clearly in one's own, and the Church is both holy *and* in need of serious analysis, healing and transformation. In view of Fowler's description of adult faith as conjunctive faith, some concerns for the

Church seem fraught with potential to foster spiritual adulthood by cultivating an ability to live in ambiguity. Two such challenges that relate to Fowler's contentions are found in two unfinished tasks for pastoral theology today. The first is the challenge to remain a eucharistic church. The second is the clarification of lay and ordained roles in pastoral ministry.

The Catholic Church is a church of eucharist *and* there is a priest shortage. Lay pastoral theologians need always to consider the potential for fostering adult faith in the midst of this pastoral dilemma, even as the presence of lay pastoral leaders propels new considerations about a definition of ministry and the style of theology that is done in doing pastoral theology. The challenge is not likely to change and even less likely to disappear. The relationship between eucharist and ministry cries out for development and clarity even in the midst of the ambiguity.

Second, the Church calls people to baptismal responsibility even as the lay persons in church service report resistance from other lay people and some clergy about lay leadership. As times and circumstances change, the spirituality of ambiguity ought to guide all persons in the conversation about the present and future Church.[19]

Conclusion

This essay has considered one nation's context for identifying the population of Catholic lay pastoral theologians whose work and reflection help to shape contemporary pastoral theology. The 'priest shortage' has visited the Catholic Church in many other nations, particularly in countries of the first world, and thus the definition of pastoral theology will be defined and refined in the context of service to the Church uniquely in each local setting. In the United States it cannot go unnoticed that the task of defining and refining this branch of theology will continue to be taken up by lay persons, primarily lay women whose pastoral 'context' has much to offer theology and the Church.

Michael Horan teaches Pastoral Theology and Religious Education at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, where he directs the graduate programmes in Theological and Pastoral Studies.

NOTES

1 Philip J. Murnion et al., *New parish ministers: laity and religious on parish staffs* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 1992).
2 *Ibid.*, p v.
3 Barbara J. Fleischer, *Ministers of the future: a study of graduate ministry students in Catholic colleges and universities* (New Orleans: Loyola Institute for Ministry, 1993).
4 *Ibid.*, pp 15–17.
5 Brian T. Froehle, *Catholic ministry formation directory* (Washington DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 1997).
6 *Ibid.*, pp 207–209.
7 *Ibid.*, p 212.
8 Thomas Groome and Robert Imbelli, 'Signposts toward a pastoral theology', *Theological Studies* vol 53, no 3 (March 1992), pp 127–137. See especially p 129.
9 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1972).
10 For examples of the context as a determining factor for the pastoral theology that the Church must create, see H. S. Wilson et al., *Pastoral theology from a global perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996).
11 Ruth A. Wallace, *They call her pastor: a new role for Catholic women* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp 171–174.
12 *Ibid.*, pp 171–173.
13 Thomas Groome, *Sharing faith: a comprehensive approach to religious education and pastoral ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991), pp 135–148.
14 For example, see Murnion, *op. cit.*, pp 66–77, on relations between lay and ordained parish leaders, and among lay persons on the staff of the parish.
15 Froehle, *op. cit.*, p 211.
16 John Westerhoff, 'Formation, education, instruction', *Religious Education* vol 82, no 4 (Fall 1987), pp 578–591.
17 Murnion, *op. cit.*, pp 92–95.
18 James W. Fowler, *Stages of faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), considers the faith development process in individuals. For Fowler's work on faith development in church communities, see James W. Fowler, *Weaving the new creation: stages of faith and the public Church* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
19 For an elaboration of this point, see Paul Bernier, *Ministry in the Church* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), especially pp 245–268.