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Curing Souls: the Forgotten Art

In the bustle of running a church, something essential has been overlooked.

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A reformation may be in process in the way pastors do their work. It may turn out to be as significant as the theological reformation of the sixteenth century. I hope so. The signs are accumulating.

The Reformers recovered the biblical doctrine of justification by faith. The gospel proclamation, fresh and personal and direct, through the centuries had become an immense, lumbering Rube Goldberg mechanism: elaborately contrived ecclesiastical gears, pulleys, and levers rumbled and creaked importantly but ended up doing something completely trivial. The Reformers recovered the personal passion and clarity so evident in Scripture. This rediscovery of firsthand involvement resulted in freshness and vigor.

The vocational reformation of our own time (if it turns out to be that) is a rediscovery of the pastoral work of the cure of souls. The phrase sounds antique. It is antique. But it is not obsolete. It catches up and coordinates, better than any other expression I am aware of, the unending warfare against sin and sorrow and the diligent cultivation of grace and faith to which the best pastors have consecrated themselves in every generation. The odd sound of the phrase may even work to advantage by calling attention to how remote present-day pastoral routines have become.

I am not the only pastor who has discovered this old identity. More and more pastors are embracing this way of pastoral work and are finding themselves authenticated by it. There are not a lot of us. We are by no means a majority, not even a high-profile minority. But one by one, pastors are rejecting the job description that has been handed to them and are taking on this new one-or, as it turns out, the old one that has been in use for most of the Christian centuries.

It is not sheer fantasy to think there may come a time when the number reaches critical mass and effects a genuine vocational reformation among pastors. Even if it doesn't, it seems to me the single most significant and creative thing happening in pastoral ministry today.

The Work of the Week

There's a distinction between what pastors do on Sundays and what we do between Sundays. What we do on Sundays has not really changed through the centuries: proclaiming the gospel, teaching Scripture, celebrating

the sacraments, offering prayers. But the work between Sundays has changed radically, and it has not been a development but a defection.

Until about a century ago, what pastors did between Sundays was of a piece with what they did on Sundays. The context changed: instead of an assembled congregation, the pastor was with one other person or with small gatherings of persons, or alone in study and prayer. The manner changed; instead of proclamation, there was conversation. But the work was the same: discovering the meaning of Scripture, developing a life of prayer, guiding growth into maturity.

This is the pastoral work that is historically termed the cure of souls. The primary sense of *cura* in Latin is "care," with undertones of "cure." The soul is the essence of the human personality. The cure of souls, then, is the Scripture-directed, prayer-shaped care that is devoted to persons singly or in groups, in settings sacred and profane. It is a determination to work at the center, to concentrate on the essential.

The between-Sundays work of American pastors in this century, though, is running a church. I first heard the phrase just a few days before my ordination. After twenty-five years, I can still remember the unpleasant impression it made.

I was traveling with a pastor I respected very much. I was full of zest and vision, anticipating pastoral life. My inner conviction of call to the pastorate was about to be confirmed by others. What God wanted me to do, what I wanted to do, and what others wanted me to do were about to converge. From fairly extensive reading about pastor and priest predecessors, I was impressed that everyday pastoral life was primarily concerned with developing a life of prayer among the people. Leading worship, preaching the gospel, and teaching Scripture on Sundays would develop in the next six days into representing the life of Christ in the human traffic of the everyday.

With my mind full of these thoughts, my pastor friend and I stopped at a service station for gasoline. My friend, a gregarious person, bantered with the attendant. Something in the exchange provoked a question.

"What do you do?"

"I run a church."

No answer could have surprised me more. I knew, of course, that pastoral life included institutional responsibilities, but it never occurred to me that I would be defined by those responsibilities. But the moment I became ordained, I found I was so defined both by the pastors and executives over me and by the parishioners around me. The first job description given me omitted prayer entirely.

Behind my back, while my pastoral identity was being formed by Gregory and Bernard, Luther and Calvin, Richard Baxter of Kidderminster and Nicholas Ferrar of Little Gidding, George Herbert and Jonathan Edwards, John Henry Newman and Alexander Whyte, Phillips Brooks and George MacDonald, the work of the

pastor had been almost completely secularized (except for Sundays). I didn't like it and decided, after an interval of confused disorientation, that being a physician of souls took priority over running a church, and that I would be guided in my pastoral vocation by wise predecessors rather than contemporaries. Luckily, I have found allies along the way and a readiness among my parishioners to work with me in changing my pastoral job description.

It should be clear that the cure of souls is not a specialized form of ministry (analogous, for instance, to hospital chaplain or pastoral counselor) but is the essential pastoral work. It is not a narrowing of pastoral work to its devotional aspects, but it is a way of life that uses weekday tasks, encounters, and situations as the raw material for teaching prayer, developing faith, and preparing for a good death. Curing souls is a term that filters out what is introduced by a secularizing culture. It is also a term that identifies us with our ancestors and colleagues in ministry, lay and clerical, who are convinced that a life of prayer is the connective tissue between holy day proclamation and weekday discipleship.

A caveat: I contrast the cure of souls with the task of running a church, but I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not contemptuous of running a church, nor do I dismiss its importance. I run a church myself; I have for over twenty years. I try to do it well.

But I do it in the same spirit that I, along with my wife, run our house. There are many essential things we routinely do, often (but not always) with joy. But running a house is not what we do. What we do is build a home, develop in marriage, raise children, practice hospitality, pursue lives of work and play. It is reducing pastoral work to institutional duties that I object to, not the duties themselves, which I gladly share with others in the church.

It will hardly do, of course, to stubbornly defy the expectations of people and eccentrically go about pastoral work like a seventeenth-century curate, even if the eccentric curate is far more sane than the current clergy. The recovery of this essential between-Sundays work of the pastor must be worked out in tension with the secularized expectations of this age: there must be negotiation, discussion, experimentation, confrontation, adaptation. Pastors who devote themselves to the guidance of souls must do it among people who expect them to run a church. In a determined and kindly tension with those who thoughtlessly presume to write job descriptions for us, we can, I am convinced, recover our proper work.

Pastors, though, who decide to reclaim the vast territory of the soul as their preeminent responsibility will not do it by going away for job retraining. We must work it out on the job, for it is not only ourselves but our people whom we are desecularizing. The task of vocational recovery is as endless as theological reformation. Details vary with pastor and parish, but there are three areas of contrast between running a church and the cure of souls that all of us experience: initiative, language, and problems.

Initiative

In running the church, I seize the initiative. I take charge. I take responsibility for motivation and

recruitment, for showing the way, for getting things started. If I don't, things drift. I am aware of the tendency to apathy, the human susceptibility to indolence, and I use my leadership position to counter it.

By contrast, the cure of souls is a cultivated awareness that God has already seized the initiative. The traditional doctrine defining this truth is prevenience: God everywhere and always seizes the initiative. He gets things going. He had and continues to have the first word. Prevenience is the conviction that God has been working diligently, redemptively, and strategically before I appeared on the scene, before I was aware there was something here for me to do.

The cure of souls is not indifferent to the realities of human lethargy, naive about congregational recalcitrance, or inattentive to neurotic cussedness. But there is a disciplined, determined conviction that everything (and I mean, precisely, everything) we do is a response to God's first word, his initiating act. We learn to be attentive to the divine action already in process so that the previously unheard word of God is heard, the previously unattended act of God is noticed.

Running-the-church questions are: What do we do? How can we get things going again?

Cure-of-souls questions are: What has God been doing here? What traces of grace can I discern in this life? What history of love can I read in this group? What has God set in motion that I can get in on?

We misunderstand and distort reality when we take ourselves as the starting point and our present situation as the basic datum. Instead of confronting the bogged-down human condition and taking charge of changing it with no time wasted, we look at divine prevenience and discern how we can get in on it at the right time, in the right way.

The cure of souls takes time to read the minutes of the previous meeting, a meeting more likely than not at which I was not present. When I engage in conversation, meet with a committee, or visit a home, I am coming in on something that has already been in process for a long time. God has been and is the central reality in that process. The biblical conviction is that God is "long beforehand with my soul." God has already taken the initiative. Like one who walks in late to a meeting, I am entering a complex situation in which God has already said decisive words and acted in decisive ways. My work is not necessarily to announce that but to discover what he is doing and live appropriately with it.

Language

In running the church I use language that is descriptive and motivational. I want people to be informed so there are no misunderstandings. And I want people to be motivated so things get done. But in the cure of souls I am far more interested in who people are and who they are becoming in Christ than I am in what they know or what they are doing. In this I soon find that neither descriptive nor motivational language helps very much.

Descriptive language is language about-it names what is there. It orients us in reality. It makes it possible for

us to find our way in and out of intricate labyrinths. Our schools specialize in teaching us this language. Motivational language is language for-it uses words to get things done. Commands are issued, promises made, requests proffered. Such words get people to do things they won't do on their own initiative. The advertising industry is our most skillful practitioner of this language art.

Indispensable as these uses of language are, there is another language more essential to our humanity and far more basic to the life of faith. It is personal language. It uses words to express oneself, to converse, to be in relationship. This is language to and with. Love is offered and received, ideas are developed, feelings are articulated, silences are honored. This is the language we speak spontaneously as children, as lovers, as poets and when we pray. It is also conspicuously absent when we are running a church-there is so much to say and do that there is no time left to be and no occasion, therefore, for the language of being there.

The cure of souls is a decision to work at the heart of things, where we are most ourselves and where our relationships in faith and intimacy are developed. The primary language must be, therefore, to and with, the personal language of love and prayer. The pastoral vocation does not take place primarily in a school where subjects are taught, nor in a barracks where assault forces are briefed for attacks on evil, but in a family-the place where love is learned, where birth takes place, where intimacy is deepened. The pastoral task is to use the language appropriate in this most basic aspect of our humanity-not language that describes, not language that motivates, but spontaneous language: cries and exclamations, confessions and appreciations, words the heart speaks.

We have, of course, much to teach and much to get done, but our primary task is to be. The primary language of the cure of souls, therefore, is conversation and prayer. Being a pastor means learning to use language in which personal uniqueness is enhanced and individual sanctity recognized and respected. It is a language that is unhurried, unforced, unexcited-the leisurely language of friends and lovers, which is also the language of prayer.

Problems

In running a church I solve problems. Wherever two or three are gathered together, problems develop. Egos are bruised, procedures get snarled, arrangements become confused, plans go awry, temperaments clash. There are policy problems, marriage problems, work problems, child problems, committee problems, emotional problems. Someone has to interpret, explain, work out new plans, develop better procedures, organize, and administer. Most pastors like to do this. I know I do. It is satisfying to help make the rough places smooth.

The difficulty is that problems arrive in such a constant flow that problem solving becomes full-time work. Because it is useful and the pastor ordinarily does it well, we fail to see that the pastoral vocation has been subverted. Gabriel Marcel wrote that life is not so much a problem to be solved as a mystery to be explored. That is certainly the biblical stance: life is not something we manage to hammer together and keep in repair by our wits; it is an unfathomable gift. We are immersed in mysteries: incredible love, confounding evil, the

creation, the cross, grace, God.

The secularized mind is terrorized by mysteries. Thus it makes lists, labels people, assigns roles, and solves problems. But a solved life is a reduced life. These tightly buttoned-up people never take great faith risks or make convincing love talk. They deny or ignore the mysteries and diminish human existence to what can be managed, controlled, and fixed. We live in a cult of experts who explain and solve. The vast technological apparatus around us gives the impression that there is a tool for everything if we can only afford it. Pastors cast in the role of spiritual technologists are hard put to keep that role from absorbing everything else, since there are so many things that need to be and can, in fact, be fixed.

But "there are things," wrote Marianne Moore, "that are important beyond all this fiddle." The old-time guide of souls asserts the priority of the "beyond" over "this fiddle." Who is available for this work other than pastors? A few poets, perhaps; and children, always. But children are not good guides, and most of our poets have lost interest in God. That leaves pastors as guides through the mysteries. Century after century we live with our conscience, our passions, our neighbors, and our God. Any narrower view of our relationships does not match our real humanity.

If pastors become accomplices in treating every child as a problem to be figured out, every spouse as a problem to be dealt with, every clash of wills in choir or committee as a problem to be adjudicated, we abdicate our most important work, which is directing worship in the traffic, discovering the presence of the cross in the paradoxes and chaos between Sundays, calling attention to the "splendor in the ordinary," and, most of all, teaching a life of prayer to our friends and companions in the pilgrimage.

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