

RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE MINISTRY DISCIPLINES



In *Master of Souls*, a volume in the series of mysteries of ancient Ireland by Peter Tremayne, Sister Fidelma and her companions encounter a rough-hewn blacksmith who promises to take them over rough seas in search of those responsible for a series of violent deaths in the region. Sister Fidelma is surprised by their sudden generosity and asks why. “Because of the character that you have revealed to us,” the smithy replies. Sister Fidelma’s authenticity inspired the reclusive blacksmith to take an enormous risk for a complete stranger.¹ The demonstration of character promotes trust, opens doors for cooperation, and invites deeper engagement with people. In this fictional account from the seventh century, character mattered, and it matters for religious leadership today.

Character is the predisposition to act in accord with one’s principles and values. In that sense, character is the complex set of mental and moral traits that mark an individual. This emphasis on character presumes that good works arise from good people. The minister’s work does not follow from a moral code or a set of theological principles or even well-developed skills and competencies but from habit, out of an ingrained, inculcated pattern of living informed by dispositions of the soul.

Ministerial character is both distinctive and deliberate. Moreover, it is never static but evolving throughout one’s lifetime. The psychologist Viktor Frankl once described the therapeutic process in a way that corresponds to the formation of character. He noted that what therapy has to achieve is to “transfer an *unconscious potentia* into a conscious *actus*, but only in order to re-establish an *unconscious habitus*.”² The formation of ministerial character requires such a transformation so that the work of religious leadership will be marked by trusted spontaneity or ‘un-self-conscious *habitus*.’ It should be as close to us as breathing.

Character formation is not an end in itself but a way to authentic living. Being an authentic individual means being naked before God. People of faith are invited to live without pretense because they believe that the human soul is ultimately hidden in God whose graciousness touches everything with mercy—even the minister’s soul. “The living of an authentic life is a continu-

ing challenge and should not be interpreted in moralistic terms, but seen as a genuine attempt to live an integrated life.”³ Religious leaders face an ongoing temptation to self-deception. In order to remain responsible and accountable, they must be willing to uncover, own, embrace, and acknowledge self-deceptions for the sake of a liberating and durable authenticity.

The essays in this section recognize in a variety of ways the significance of authentic character in the practice of religious or spiritual disciplines. The virtues that Gordon Hilsman connected to professional standards in a previous essay, Lisa Fullam examines as part of an ethical framework that is necessary for spiritual guidance. The spiritual guide must embody the virtues he or she seeks to form. Virtues are the qualities of character that help us be alive. “They are the narratives of human flourishing, of the integrity of lives well-lived, of being people like those we find worthy of imitation” (p. 89). Even though perfection is not possible, the spiritual guide needs to be devoted to a continual process of embodying virtues.

For Ron Sunderland and Ted Smith, forming and supervising lay ministers of care in and for a hospital setting is grounded in “accountability for the baptismal vows through which believers are instated within the gospel story” (p. 99). Within a covenant framework for learning, accountability is fundamental for the quality and effectiveness of lay ministry. The authors also insist that churches must be held “accountable for their failure to empower lay people to engage in pastoral ministry as a vocation in which they seek to live out their baptismal vows” (p. 108).

Very little has been written about the formation and supervision of spiritual directors. Janet Rufing has provided a comprehensive review of this developing form of spiritual guidance. She reiterates the theme of continual growth for both supervisee and supervisor articulated by Lisa Fullam. “Because supervision of neophyte spiritual directors is very much a spiritual process, supervisors also need to attend to their own self-care and the depth of their own contemplative lives and spiritual growth” (p. 123). The centrality of prayer in spiritual direction must be mirrored in supervision.

Most religious institutions have some rubric stating that ministers have the responsibility to ensure that they receive regular professional supervision. There has been ample evidence in the last decades that religious institutions have not always held themselves accountable to the same standards that they have expected of ministers and religious leaders. On the basis of his pilot project on professional supervision of pastoral ministry leaders in the Uniting Church of Australia, Raymond A. Reddicliffe argues persuasively for dual ac-

countability to strengthen the safety net for religious leaders and to transform the institutions to which they are accountable.

The program of renewal for lay and ordained pastoral leaders that Marianne LaBarre describes is a distinctive program of spiritual coaching that combines spiritual direction and professional supervision with the practice of leadership coaching. Once pastoral leaders identify, with a spiritual coach, the changes they want to make, an agreement of mutual accountability is made that seeks to reinforce the resolve of the pastoral leader to make changes. To create an environment that encourages and supports the desired change, spiritual coaching, as LaBarre defines it, aims to foster an ethic of enduring responsibility and accountability that is simultaneously individual and mutual.

In the concluding essay in this section, Christie Cozad Neuger discusses the ongoing tragedy of clergy sexual misconduct. As this volume is being prepared, more allegations and instances of child sexual abuse and institutional negligence are emerging in the Roman Catholic Church in Europe. Neuger's focus is on clergy-to-adult forms of sexual misconduct, not because it is more offensive than child sexual abuse but because it continues to be more easily excused or overlooked. If the Christian Church is in decline in the West, it is in part because congregations have not always had pastoral leaders committed to embodying and maintaining trustworthy relationships. Character matters. To paraphrase Christie Neuger's last line, trustworthiness and authenticity must be a top priority for all religious communities because too much is at stake.

NOTES

1. Peter Tremayne, *Master of Souls: A Novel of Ancient Ireland* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).
2. Viktor E. Frankl and James M. Dubois, *On the Theory and Therapy of Mental Disorders: An Introduction to Logotherapy and Existential Analysis*, trans. James M. Dubois (New York: Routledge, 2004), 213.
3. John E. Paver, *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry: Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 2.

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Ethics of Spiritual Guidance

Lisa Fullam

Ask most people about ethics in spiritual guidance—defined broadly to include pastoral ministries, spiritual direction, and other forms of spiritual care—and you'll quickly find yourself in a discussion of two issues: boundaries and confidentiality.¹ If you push further and ask about accountability, often you'll get a response about financial transparency. Ask about responsibility, and perhaps they'll mention vulnerable people, especially children and others liable to sexual abuse or exploitation. All of these are important, even crucial, issues.

The problem starts when you then ask what should be done about these ethical problems. On boundaries, you might get a list of whom one may and may not date. On confidentiality, they'll often respond with a list of who is a mandated reporter for what. Financial transparency? Have a pastoral council that provides budget oversight. Abuse? Have a window put in the door of your office. These are not bad ideas, but I will argue here that they skip a step and miss a critical aspect of what it means to be a professional offering spiritual guidance: they miss questions about the character, the virtues, of the guide. Ethical reflection that focuses on the character of the agent is an ancient

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