

Virtues and Praxis in Ministry Education

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Pastoral leadership requires a complex set of competencies involving core skills and knowledge, as well as ancillary competencies specific to each particular ministry. Theological schools and professional ministry organizations¹ are continually honing the educational outcomes they expect their professional ministry students to attain. Yet, knowledge and skills do not tell the whole picture of preparation for ministry. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops point out, ministry preparation involves development of a person's human maturity and spirituality as well as theological and pastoral knowledge and skills.² They speak of these human qualities in terms of "formation" and assert, "Effective formation methods address the whole person: emotions, imagination, will, heart, and mind. It is the whole person who ministers, so the whole person is the proper subject of formation."³ Similarly, to serve as a minister in fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association, a candidate must show more than adequate theological preparation and pastoral skillfulness. He or she "must demonstrate a balanced and healthy personality, a capacity for self-understanding, [and] a concern for others"⁴ Each of these examples highlights that *who* the minister becomes is as important as *what* the minister knows and does.

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In this reflection, I want to suggest that the categories of virtues and virtue development may be a more fruitful and clarifying way of addressing the “qualities,” “human maturity,” and “personality” traits that various denominations insist are essential to ministerial practice. I also focus on the shift to praxis-oriented education as a movement that enhances the possibility of bringing virtues into the limelight for the education of pastoral leaders. Finally, I offer one approach to the integration of virtue development into a ministry education curriculum.

VIRTUES

Virtues are “habits of the heart,”⁵ enduring dispositions toward actions that are considered to be honorable, good, or worthy of our highest ideals. As such, they cannot simply be subsumed under the categories of academic knowledge or pastoral skills. They arise from reflection on action in light of embraced ideals, and they require a continuous cycle of action and reflection, leading to a honed awareness of one’s own motivations, desires, and actions in various settings. They emerge from a reflective practice that is nourished by increasing clarity on what “goodness” calls for in each encountered situation and what personal transformations are required to act authentically in line with those ideals. Jesuit theologian, Gerald Fagin, SJ notes that virtuous dispositions shape our actions, while “at the same time, how we act shapes the habits and dispositions we develop.”⁶

Virtues involve intentional practices that cultivate consistency. To say that a person is “kind” implies that the person’s kindness is perdurable across contexts, circumstances, and relationships. One act of courage may be considered virtuous, but a person who has become courageous has developed that virtue by finding a voice in the face of adversity and consistently standing firm for a friend, a community, or an ideal despite risks, sometimes even to life itself. Virtues thus require an internal freedom to act without compulsion, to discern what is right in particular circumstances, and to act in accordance with the virtue consistently. Moreover, in Christian and other religious frameworks, human virtues involve collaboration with God’s Spirit acting within us.

The Shift Away from the “Theory-to-Practice” Paradigm

Religious educator and theologian Thomas Groome points out that much of theological education preparing pastoral ministers emphasizes theoretical knowledge, with additional courses to develop pastoral skills, in a “theo-

ry to practice" paradigm. Ministry students, in the traditional educational model employed in seminary and graduate schools, receive a "heavy dose" of theory and history in systematic, scripture, and church history "and then to tag on, almost as an afterthought, some training in pastoral skills to help them apply that theory to practice."⁷ This theory-to-practice paradigm, contends Groome, separates the academic study of theology from the living faith of the community, "with all of its struggles, joys, pains, and praxis in the world."⁸ Theology's primary work in this classical paradigm is to clarify and systematize the faith community's understandings of divine truth. It follows Anselm's description of theology as "faith seeking understanding." But, says Groome, the task of theology is not merely to understand divine revelation; it is also to empower the community's participation in transforming the world.⁹ The pastoral minister's ability to respond to people in their complex life situations requires a practical wisdom that enables ministers to read the world and situations they encounter, think theologically in those various contexts, and act effectively and catalytically with compassion and justice. I would add that the theory-to-practice paradigm incorporates knowledge and skills into the educational process but tends to relegate virtue "formation" to extra-curricular activities, such as retreats, spiritual events, and a personal integration left up to the student.

Edward Farley sounds a similar theme in critiquing the traditional approach to theological education, stating that it mainly involves interpretation of "the past and the texts of the past."¹⁰ He notes that by the nineteenth century, a model of theological education had developed that continues to exist in many seminaries: i.e., theological courses involve a theoretical study that leaves out the systematic analysis and interpretation of the situations of real people. What was called the discipline of "practical theology" in this model of ministry education simply became the "applied" dimension of clergy education. As a separate discipline from the study of Scripture, academic theology, and ethics, this version of practical theology included fields such as catechetics, liturgy, and pastoral care,¹¹ and these "applied" courses generally took place after a considerable amount of more "academic" courses were completed.

Farley notes that recent writings from both Protestant and Catholic theologians urge that the full study of theology again become more "practical" and praxis-oriented as it was in earlier centuries. A corrective is needed that would "restore to theology a comprehensive discipline of praxis."¹²

Farley explains further, "in any modern approach, praxis itself as an intrinsic element of theology must be rediscovered."¹³

Reflecting on theological education, as well on educational approaches in other university disciplines, theologian Bernard Lee suggests that the deep roots of the emphasis on *theory* go back to Aristotelian influences on Western thought. In Aristotle's schema, there are three kinds of knowledge, the highest of which results from contemplation on eternal truths (*theoria*). A second kind of knowledge is practical wisdom (*phronesis*) for living in the world and relating within the community (*praxis*). The third kind of knowing involves skills for making things (*techne*). Lee suggests that *praxis* has been traditionally relegated to a lower place than theory in university education because this Aristotelian model places a high priority on theory over praxis. This schema has been embedded deeply in the Western consciousness since the twelfth century, when Aristotle's work was largely rediscovered and Western universities began to take shape. Lee further employs Aristotle's description of the three types of knowing to elucidate a major transformation that is happening in the field of ministry education, and which he hopes will be embraced by other university disciplines. It is "the shift to a praxis model of education...from educating the subject as knower, the classical model, to educating the subject as historical agent."¹⁴ Lee's image for what is happening in contemporary graduate ministry education involves placing the primacy on *praxis* and its transformative power in the world, with *theoria* and *techne* serving the development of effective *praxis*.

Practical Theology: A New Paradigm for Ministerial Education

There are over 50 Roman Catholic programs that comprise the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry (AGPIM) that have transformed the image of practical theology from a separate "applied discipline" of theology to an essentially praxis-oriented endeavor involving all of theology. In 1991, the Association adopted a statement that "recognizes and supports the emergence of a new paradigm in graduate education for ministry." The statement names practical theology as the new paradigm and describes it as "a mutually interpretive, critical, and transforming conversation between the Christian tradition and contemporary experience. Historical, hermeneutical, and socio-cultural analyses are integral to this method of theology." AGPIM further affirms that "practical theology takes place in a community of faith, implies a spirituality that is both personal and liturgical, and is directed towards individual and social transformation in Christ."¹⁵ Both the

individual minister and the Christian community are thus charged with the question, "Who am I (or we) becoming? How am I (or we) moving toward transformation in Christ?" Although not stated as such, these are essentially questions of virtue.

The *praxis* emphasis of practical theology, as described by AGPIM, transposes Aristotle's schema away from its original hierarchy of knowing. For Aristotle, contemplation of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful is the highest form of knowing, followed by *phronesis/praxis*, and then *techne*. This emphasis in the Western world, observes Lee, has led to a focus on "theory" and lecture modes of education. Often, the Western "classical" model of education leaves the practical implication of content to the student's own work. Students attend the university to gain "knowledge;" what they do with it is up to them. Emphasis on the virtue of *phronesis*, or wisdom, needed for transformative living in the world is often missing.

In the contemporary ministry education adopted by AGPIM schools, *praxis* holds center stage. The other two forms of knowing and their expressions in education (*theoria* and *techne*) are subordinate to and serve *phronesis* and its *praxis* in order to focus on wisdom and its embodiment in relational living. While it is sometimes dangerous to ask and make assertions about "God's intentions," Lee points out that "we have no choice but to ask that question, or else we remain forever neutral towards the events of our lives—and that would be the most destructive of all."¹⁶ Sacred texts are where communities of faith search to find the practical wisdom and guidance for their everyday decisions. Hence, an image often used to describe practical theology is that of holding a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Continual dialogical reflection on Sacred texts helps us develop the practical wisdom to respond virtuously to the world around us.

In Christian thought the work of transforming self and society according to God's intentions is not entirely our own. It is God's work within and through us. Part of our becoming involves becoming more open to God's work within us, more free to choose the good, and more attentive to the workings of God's Spirit around us. The development of a virtuous *praxis* involves prayer and a deepening spirituality that allows a divine reshaping of our very thought, feeling, and action patterns. There are many virtues from which to choose for doing God's work. Prayerful consideration is necessary to determine which virtues should be nurtured for the sake of good ministry.

WHICH VIRTUES?

When we ask “How can I live more virtuously?” we are faced with a catalogue full of virtues that emerge both from sacred texts and other philosophical and secular sources. How many virtues are there and which are most important (especially for ministry and pastoral leadership)? Are there universal virtues that are common across cultures and time, or are the names of virtues specific to each community? These are some of the questions that have been addressed by psychologists Christopher Peterson, Martin Seligman, and colleagues in a major study of character strengths and virtues, resulting in a classification of virtues that have appeared cross-culturally and across history. Funded by the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation, this three-year study focused on what constitutes “good character” and yielded a set of six clusters of virtues, with a total of twenty-four character traits that have appeared regularly in philosophical, literary, news, and even graffiti writings.

The researchers consulted works from such varied sources as the writings of Confucius, Charlemagne, Benjamin Franklin, as well as Hallmark greeting cards, song lyrics, poetry, bumper stickers, *Saturday Evening Post* covers, and the resident halls of Hogwarts to gather an initial list of potential virtues.¹⁷ Using a classification scheme and key questions, the researchers were able to identify and categorize the clusters of virtues that have appeared consistently in various cultures and time periods. In addition, the team reviewed relevant research on personality traits, human developmental stages, and research related to the inter-relationship among various human qualities.

Peterson and Seligman describe “virtues” as the “core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers.”¹⁸ Their research identified the following as the major categories of virtues found cross-culturally and historically: *wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence*.¹⁹ Each of these major virtues encompasses several *character strengths* (which other authors may still name as “virtues” in different classification scheme). They define *character strengths* as: “the psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that define the virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable roots to display one or another of the virtues.”²⁰ The virtues they identify and the character strengths that comprise them are as follows:

Wisdom: Creativity, Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Love of learning, and Perspective.

Courage: Bravery, Persistence (perseverance), Integrity (authenticity, honesty), Vitality.

Humanity: Love, Kindness (generosity, compassion), Social (emotional) Intelligence

Justice: Citizenship (social responsibility), Fairness, Leadership.

Temperance: Forgiveness/Mercy, Humility/Modesty, Prudence (in the sense of “not taking undo risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted”)

Transcendence: Appreciation of beauty and excellence (“noticing and appreciating”), Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality.²¹

The lists of character strengths related to each major virtue are meant to be illustrative of the virtue but not exhaustive in describing it.

The authors point out that because lists of virtues are typically numerous, most philosophers writing about virtues tend to place them in a hierarchy. However, no one hierarchy of virtues has won universal acceptance.²² Thomas Aquinas, for example, names four cardinal virtues: temperance, courage, justice, and wisdom and adds three theological virtues proclaimed by St. Paul: faith, hope, and charity. These three are God-given virtues and are considered more important than the cardinal virtues. Like Paul,²³ Thomas sets charity, or love, as the highest virtue.²⁴

Philosopher Alastair MacIntyre points out that while a virtue such as “courage” may be revered in various cultures, the practice of that virtue is shaped by its context and social structure.²⁵ What may seem courageous in one society may be considered imprudent in another. What is considered fair and just in corporate America may be different from how justice is envisioned in inner city ghettos or Latin American barrios. Yet, despite these potential differences, we must, as members of faith communities, continue to search out what God’s intentions, God’s *shalom*, may call for in each context that we encounter.

If prudent and virtuous praxis is to take center stage in ministry, then the cultivation of personal and communal spirituality and virtues needs to be part of the overall educational endeavor for ministry. Such a shift to praxis-oriented education requires an integrated approach to spiritual and personal development as part of the overall learning process. Although it still has much room for growth and enhancement, I offer here one example of graduate ministry education that is centered on the practical theology paradigm as described by the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry.

One Approach to Graduate Ministry Education Rooted in Practical Theology

The Loyola Institute for Ministry (LIM) offers a Master of Pastoral Studies and a Master of Religious education through a variety of delivery systems. For this example, I focus here on the Extension program that is offered in cooperation with various “sponsoring agencies,” primarily Roman Catholic dioceses, which provide meeting space and administrative support for courses in their chosen locations. The program is currently offered through dioceses in the United States, Scotland, England, Belize, and Nigeria.

The LIM Extension program involves a cohort of students who meet weekly for ten sessions per course. The students receive faculty lectures in print form ahead of the class time and complete a variety of assignments, including lecture and textbook reading, library research, and field work, before coming to a course session. Faculty presence is provided through the print lectures, the design of sessions, guidance from adjunct faculty who are in contact with the groups and who grade assignments, and student advisement and availability to students through toll-free phone and email contact with Loyola faculty. The sessions themselves are led by a Master’s level facilitator, selected by Loyola upon successful completion of a week-long Certification workshop. Loyola faculty also provide an extensive syllabus with discussion questions and course assignments, a Facilitator’s manual for each course with detailed designs for experiential exercises and other session activities, and brief session videos often featuring conversations with authors of course textbooks and other experts in the field. Because the courses are offered in a student’s own location, students engage in some form of ministry throughout the program and bring those praxis reflections into the session discussions.

The heart of the program lies in its “model” and “method” of theological reflection. The reflection process methodology is rooted in the four levels of consciousness identified by Jesuit theologian, Bernard Lonergan,²⁶ and is aimed at helping students integrate the content of courses with their own life and ministerial experience. In using this reflection process, students: 1) identify a focus for reflection; 2) articulate their initial understandings of the event or subject; 3) test those understandings in light of research and experience; and 4) decide what modifications of their initial understanding have emerged and what implications those new understandings hold for their own life and ministry. The methodology calls for a disciplined process of critical reflection, on both content and experience, in the group setting and in written assignments.

The “model” used in the program is contextual. The third step in the reflection process described above (the *testing* phase) calls for students to search out the *sociocultural* realities of the ministerial situations in which they work, the *institutional* realities impinging upon their ministry, their own *personal* strengths and weaknesses, and the Christian tradition as they engage in exegetical and historical research. Students are also encouraged to be mindful of the natural world and examine how their own bio-region affects their ministries. The curriculum develops students’ ability to engage in this overall process with greater depth and versatility as they continue this reflection process in courses on Scripture, systematic and historical theology, morality, and ethics. The curriculum also offers courses designed to assist students in understanding the sociocultural, personal, and organizational contexts of their ministries. Students further complete two focus courses in their chosen ministry area. The reflection process is incorporated throughout each of these courses. While we have not specifically used the term “virtues” in assisting students to reflect on their own personal strengths and weaknesses in this contextual model, we are moving in that direction and will do so with more intentionality in the near future. We have already taken one step in that direction through the spiritual formation component of each session in the course that draws upon the pattern of the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*.²⁷

A 450-YEAR-OLD PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING VIRTUES IN PASTORAL LEADERS

During his lifetime, Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Jesuit order of Catholic priests and brothers, developed and refined a set of *Spiritual Exercises*, which he, and eventually others over the centuries, have used to help persons become more aware of their purpose in life, more attuned to God’s love—even in times of failure and sin, and more committed to work toward God’s reign on earth. Ignatius developed these exercises in the pattern of the movements of heart that he experienced as his own conversion to Christ deepened. Normally, the *Exercises* involve an experience of thirty days of solitude and prayer, whereby the person is led to fuller conversion, experience of God’s love, and freedom to be able to serve others. The *Exercises* involve various meditations, reflection questions, and Scriptural passages related to the themes of each of its four “weeks.”

In his book, *Putting on the Heart of Christ*, Gerald Fagin, points out that the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* mark a return to virtues.²⁸ Each of the

movements of the *Exercises* relate to the development of a set of virtues, with Gratitude being high on Ignatius' list. The meditations open a person first to a sense of reverence and move through others, such as gratitude, forgiveness, generosity, hospitality, humility, compassion, and joy. The *Exercises* culminate with a focus on Love through Ignatius' Contemplation on the Love of God.

Ignatius developed much of the content for his *Spiritual Exercises* during his own retreat in a cave located near Manresa, Spain. His pattern was one of *praxis* in that he would rise in the pre-dawn hours for prayer and meditation and then later in the day go into the town to engage others in what he called spiritual conversations. His own journal, wherein he reflected upon his experiences, became the basis for the *Exercises*, and he continued developing the *Exercises* as he guided others through the process. Hence, the *Exercises* emerged from Ignatius' own reflective practice.

At the Loyola Institute for Ministry of Loyola University New Orleans, Gerald Fagin, has developed a set of weekly reflections for graduate students studying for their Master of Pastoral Studies or Master of Religious Education through the LIM Extension program. Intertwined with the content and praxis assignments done in preparation for each session are reflections on the weekly Scriptural passages that are based on the movements and themes of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Since cohorts move through ten of the courses in sequence, students are encountering, reflecting upon, and journaling on the graces and virtues embedded in the meditations over their four-year course of study. At the beginning of each session, students also meet in small groups to share the grace and movements they have experienced from their Ignatian meditations and prayer during the week.

In the LIM Extension program, theological study, communication and relational skills development, reflection on ministry praxis, and spiritual/virtue development are thus integrated together, rather than separated into parts. This integration is shown in what alums identify as the most significant learnings they have gained through the program. In response to an end-of-program survey question asking, "What personal transformations, if any, have you experienced a result of your participation in this program?" graduates responded with the following major themes: 1) increased spiritual growth, 2) better understanding of faith/faith development, 3) increased confidence, 4) increased ministry knowledge/skills, 5) personal growth, 6) grew kinder, gentler, more relaxed, compassionate, (tied for 6th) increased ability in critical reflection, and 7) greater sense of community/community

of faith²⁹ One particularly significant lesson we as faculty have learned is the importance of selecting facilitators who are highly skilled in group process and communication skills, as well as in theological knowledge. In a dialogical setting where students are invited to name their initial understandings and assumptions, the group moves easily from the stage of “forming” to “storming.”³⁰ A skilled facilitator is able to listen carefully to the issues at hand and ask insightful questions to help participants reflect further on their comments. Without such a facilitator, group members may remain entrenched in their initial viewpoints without engaging in the discipline of critical reflection. We continue to work on selection tools and criteria both to help sponsoring agencies identify potentially successful candidates and to assist Loyola faculty in selecting the facilitators who are most skilled and knowledgeable.

Some areas for further development in the program include using the language of “virtues” more intentionally in speaking of the “personal context” of one’s ministry and helping students engage their faith communities in the practice of virtues (such as justice, forgiveness, patience, and compassion). While this educational program is but one approach to integrating a focus on virtues into a ministerial curriculum, it offers possibilities for other ways of intentionally highlighting the development of virtues and deepening of spiritual practices into an educational curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The shift in graduate ministry education from a classical model to a praxis-oriented approach opens new opportunities for highlighting and focusing on virtues as an integral aspect of pastoral education. Virtue development requires the rhythm of ongoing reflection on praxis that engenders practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, to guide movements toward virtuous living. A praxis mode of education provides such opportunities to a much greater extent than a more classical and didactic approach to education. Virtues themselves need to be highlighted in the curriculum to help students address the questions, “Who am I becoming?” and “Who ought I to become?” Hopefully, as the importance of virtues in ministry education continues to surface, we will be blessed with the presence of many more virtuous pastoral leaders in our communities!

NOTES

1. In the Catholic arena, five national ministry organizations have recently collaborated to develop certification standards for pastoral ministers, with approval from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. See the *Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers* developed by the Alliance for the Certification of Lay Ecclesial Ministers, 2011.
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2005), 31.
3. *Ibid.*, 33.
4. Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, "Requirements for Ministers," August 18, 2011, available online at <http://www.uua.org/careers/ministers/becoming/16219.shtml> (Last accessed March 6, 2012).
5. Phrase borrowed from the title of *Habits of the Heart*; Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).
6. Gerald M. Fagin, SJ, *Putting on the Heart of Christ: How the Spiritual Exercises Invite Us to a Virtuous Life* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2010), 9–10.
7. Thomas Groome, "Theology on Our Feet," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, Louis S. Mudge and James N. Poling, eds. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987, 2009), 57.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 63.
10. Edward Farley, "Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology," in *Formation and Reflection*, Mudge and Poling, eds., 1.
11. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
12. *Ibid.*, 6.
13. *Ibid.*, 7.
14. Bernard Lee, "Practical Theology: Its Character and Possible Implications for Higher Education," *Current Issues in Higher Education* 14, no. 2, (Winter 1994): 25–36; 25.
15. AGPIM Statement on Practical Theology, quoted in Lee, "Practical Theology," 26.
16. *Ibid.*, 26.
17. Christopher Peterson and Martin E. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 15.
18. *Ibid.*, 13.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*

21. Ibid., 29–30.
22. Ibid., 87.
23. 1 Cor. 13:1–13.
24. Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 47.
25. Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 2007).
26. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Seabury, 1972), 14.
27. George Gauss, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992).
28. Fagin, *Putting on the Heart of Christ*, 1–13.
29. Barbara Fleischer, “Mezirow’s Theory of Transformative Learning and Lonergan’s Method of Theology: Resources for Adult Theological Education,” *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 3, no. 2 (2006): 147–162; 160.
30. Bruce W. Tuckman and Mary Ann C. Jensen, “Stages of Small Group Development Revisited,” *Group and Organizational Studies* 2, no. 4 (1977): 419–427. Tuckman and Jensen, in a review of the literature on stages of group development, summarized the five primary stages of group life as: *forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning*.