

PASTOR AS SERVANT LEADER

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The Pastor should be “for” his parishioners and “with” his parishioners in the exercise of his pastoral ministry. This statement is foundational to the ministry of the Priest, while being consecrated to God as another Christ; his first priority is providing the life-giving sacraments that were instituted by Christ. Having Christ as the supreme model and goal the Priest seeks to sacrifice himself for the good of the other as Christ did even to the point of death, death on a cross. He desires to be ‘for’ and ‘with’ those he is called to serve; as Christ became a slave to give his life for us. This reflection will explore why and how the Pastor in his likeness to Christ should be for and with his parishioners in the exercise of his pastoral ministry.



The Pastor needs to be “for” his parishioners; he no longer owns his life. It has been given to God and it is no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him.¹ The Pastor leads by heroic virtue, and the witness of his life which speaks louder than any homily he will ever preach. Think of the wonderful example of Pope Francis; in the first year of his pontificate he has gained the attention of many and, I would argue, not only by his words but more so by his actions and his gestures. The Pastor should have a disciplined life, of deep prayer, contemplation, mortification, and sanctity, through a plan of life that he is accountable for and that bears fruit in his life and therefore in the lives of his parishioners. This is because the Pastor is not only the leader of the people but he is also their teacher and primary example after Jesus. If the Pastor has a fervent faith, those in his parish will rise up to the challenge and witness that he sets. If the Pastor is mediocre and luke-warm in his devotion to the Lord the parishioners will be neither inspired nor obliged to fulfill the minimum in their relationship with Christ nor with their responsibilities in the parish. *“As iron sharpens iron so one person sharpens another”*²

Furthermore, the pastor is ‘for’ the people in the way he leads his life, even his personal life, because he is a public figure representing Jesus Christ. The Church proposes, not imposes, the faith, therefore, we need to lead by example. *“There are two ways to lead, first give example and second to teach.”*³ The Pastor has been commissioned by God and the Bishop with the care of these souls, to form them and help them on their journey to Heaven. St. Peter also encourages this good example in his first Letter; *“So I exhort the presbyters among you, as a fellow presbyter and witness to the sufferings of Christ ... Tend the flock of God in your midst, overseeing not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock”*⁴ When St. Peter warns not to lord the authority given over others, it is because this lording over is a common temptation for those in authority. But the authority that Jesus practices and bestows is that of service, for Jesus came to serve not to be served;⁵ therefore, his followers should likewise seek to serve. Blessed John Paul II when speaking of the formation of priests said, *“The spiritual existence of every priest receives its life and inspiration from exactly this type of authority, from service to the Church, precisely inasmuch as it is required by the priest’s configuration to Jesus Christ Head and Servant of the Church.”*⁶ The priest needs to offer himself as holocaust victim to the Father, as Christ did. This is where his fulfillment lies to do the will of the one who sent him. *“I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.”*⁷ *Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”*⁸

Moreover if the Priest fails to serve, he will not only fail his parishioners; he will not be satisfied because he is called to be another Christ. Last Holy Thursday, Pope Francis called his brother priests to go out of themselves and “anoint” and to be “with” their people.

“The priest who seldom goes out of himself, who anoints little...misses out on the best of our people, on what can stir the depths of his priestly heart. Those who do not go out of themselves, instead of being mediators, gradually become intermediaries, managers ... and since he doesn't put his own skin and his own heart on the line, he never hears a warm, heartfelt word of thanks. This is precisely the reason for the dissatisfaction of some, who end up sad - sad priests - in some sense becoming collectors of antiques or novelties, instead of being shepherds living with “the odor of the sheep”. This I ask you: be shepherds, with the “odor of the sheep”, make it real, as shepherds among your flock, fishers of men.”⁹

The Pope is calling the Priest to service—his foundational call for the good of the people and for his personal good. From this text we learn that this being “with” is also imaged after Christ's own life of being with the Twelve but not exclusively them. Although he had a deeper relationship with the Twelve, he was for all and included the Twelve in that mission. Similarly the priest needs to shepherd his flock and “smell like the sheep.” He must shepherd not only those whom he is comfortable with or those who provide for the parish but all of the parishioners, providing them with the sacraments that will lead to eternal life.

In conclusion, the exercise of the Pastor's Pastoral Ministry, he should be for and with the parishioners; for their good and for his own growth in holiness. The very nature of his vocation is to be for the other. If selfishness seeps in the Pastor closes in on himself and ceases to represent Christ and His mission.

¹Holy Bible, New American Bible, USCCB.org, 2014, Cf; Romans 2:20

²Holy Bible, NAB, USCCB.org, Proverbs 27:17

³Dubay, Thomas Fr, Deep Prayer, Deep Conversion, Ignatius Press San Francisco, 2006.

⁴Holy Bible, New American Bible, USCCB.org, 1 Peter 5:1-3

⁵Holy Bible, New American Bible, USCCB.org, Matthew 20:28

⁶Blessed John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, Pastores Dabo Vobis, On the Formation of Priest in the Circumstances of the Present Day, March 25, 1992, 21

⁷Holy Bible, New American Bible, USCCB.org, John 4:34

⁸Holy Bible, New American Bible, USCCB.org, Romans 12:1-2

⁹Pope Francis, Homily of Chrism Mass, March 28, 2013, Vatican.va

[Back to Main Page of Teachings of SCTJM...](#)



Return to main page
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