

## ***Humilitas and Ethical Ministry Practice***

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Andre Louf, OCSO, stated perceptively in *The Way of Humility*, “It is not a question of the *virtue* of humility but rather the *state* of humility...” Whether intended or not, Louf’s consideration offers a timely critique of practical theology’s present concentration on human agency. His striking counterpoint being, a “broken-hearted” consent to grace, wherein the emergence of reliable spirited practice is contingent upon divestment, not accumulation.

This workshop will explore the possibilities of humility as understood by Louf *et al* in relation to our conference theme, *Ethics Matter!* Specifically, I will suggest that Christian humility – a “wise poverty” in the poetics of Eugene Peterson – is, in essence, an *active* disposition, thus a potentially reliable vessel for substantive, affective and ethical ministry practices.

*Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years.*

Wendell Berry, ‘Mad Farmer Liberation Front’

*How stale our spiritual language can sometimes seem in the face of a rare, clear spirit. I don’t really believe in atheists. Nor in true believers, for that matter. One either lives towards God or not.*

Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light*

Recently I submitted my doctoral thesis, *Spiritual Affections and the Pastoral Disposition*. Its final chapter lists and describes six dispositions that I believe are definitive in both pastoral shape and gifting. Not surprisingly I began with humility (*humilitas*), a sure foundation for all interrelated aspects of ministry practice or, better still, the humus in which other pastoral virtues grow and flourish in the love (*affectus*) of God and neighbour.

And while the pre-eminence of humility seemed obvious enough, what was not apparent to me initially was the Christian tradition’s insistence – arguably beginning with St. Paul via his theological adoption of the *Carmen Christi*<sup>1</sup> –

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2: 5-11. See, Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009). Gorman argues that this particular text is

that humility is derivative of, and contingent upon, an enfolding relationship within God. As such, it is not simply another virtue to practice and meritoriously amass. Paradoxically, humility in Christ (*en Christou*) is both a gifted *and* intentional way of his own self-emptying (*kenosis*) unto death; the ultimate state of divestment! As St. Augustine states in contradistinction to the virtue-orientated philosophies of his own day and age, "... humility comes from elsewhere, from the One who, being the Most High, wished to empty Himself for us."<sup>2</sup> Framed more philosophically, Charles Taylor affirms the same 'from without' principle:

For believers, often or typically, the sense is that fullness comes to them, that it is something they receive; moreover, receive in something like a personal relation, from another being capable of love and giving; approaching fullness involves among other things, practices of devotion and prayer (as well as charity, giving); and they are aware of being self-enclosed, bound to lesser things and goals, not able to open themselves and receive/give as they would at the place of fullness. So there is the notion of receiving fullness in a relation; but the receiver isn't simply empowered in his/her present condition; he/she needs to be opened, transformed, brought out of self... This is a very Christian formulation... For modern unbelievers, the predicament is quite different. The power to reach fullness is within.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, when humility is practiced and understood as a dependent state of being *in relation*, I believe it has much to offer our present discourse around Christian ethics. In other words, prior to any pastoral action—good, bad or even in between—lies the pastoral disposition, here specifically meaning a *cruciform* posture or stance toward the world; i.e., a desirous inclination towards the sacrificial heart and mind of Christ. As such, it is the "wounding (puncturing) of divine love" as the medieval mystical writers' liked to speak of it.<sup>4</sup> More recently Pope Francis described the necessary humble predisposition

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Paul's 'master narrative.' See also, Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5-11 In recent interpretation and in the setting of early Christian worship*. Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> *Ennarationies in Psalm 2 31:18*. As quoted by Andre Louf, OCSO, *The Way of Humility*, trans. Lawrence S. Cunningham (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2007), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 8.

for any Christian minister as a “shattered heart.” He adds:

Only the one who has been touched and caressed by the tenderness of his mercy really knows the Lord... when you let yourself be embraced (within an acknowledged sinfulness), when you are moved (affected)—that’s when life can change, because that’s when we try to respond to the immense and unexpected gift of grace, a gift that is so overabundant it may even seem “unfair” in our eyes.<sup>5</sup>

I am aware that this is not commonly adopted language nor is it representative of more professionalised perspectives. Particularly within prominent practical theology schools known for what Andrew Root describes as a “neo-Aristotelian” proclivity, wherein virtuous practice (an *imitatio Christi*) is considered *in itself* to be constitutive of the Christian life.<sup>6</sup> This standing in significant contrast to a *participatio Christi*, which occurs not by virtue of accumulated human merit but by means of a radically vulnerable—potentially life-shattering—consent to grace. Renewed life arising from a genuine, not phantom-like death. The very same “baptised into Christ” ontology of the Pauline corpus and the Johannine writings—most notable John 15—from which all things Christian rise and flow, pastoral ethics notwithstanding: “For apart from me you can do nothing,” states Jesus in what I consider to be one of the most (culturally) affronting or perhaps shocking teachings of the entire New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

I would contend that such present counter balancing within practical theology circles led by Root, Andrew Purves and the New Testament scholar, Michael

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<sup>4</sup> See, Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, vol. 1, Sermon 18, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1971). In Bernard’s thought, ‘compunction of heart’ is the first phase of the effusive, ministering spirit. 138-139.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli*, trans. Oonagh Stranksy (London: Bluebird Books, 2016), 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 73. By way of example, the respected pastoral theologian Kathleen Cahalan boldly defines the mystery of the Holy Trinity in terms of a saving praxis, suggesting that, “God’s practice of creating, renewing, and redeeming of all life is divine spiritual practice.” See, Kathleen Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 163. Cahalan’s language is so culturally familiar (that being of an immanent, moral and efficient causation) that it might pass us by without even a murmur of dissent. Yet in the broader context of the Christian tradition, her practice-based theology and ecclesiology is suggestively void of the trajectory of *theosis*, that is, transformative participation within the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4) in accord with final causation; namely, the longed-for Kingdom of God.

<sup>7</sup> John 15:5b.

Gorman, need not be interpreted here as a spiritualised way around pressing ethical matters inherent to pastoral practice. Quite the reverse is true. More pointedly is that the operative ministry of the Triune God —*divine agency*—is being reaffirmed here, not to the exclusion of responsible (or creative) human action, rather in terms of participatory possibilities, depth and enduring fruitfulness. Humility in this context, therefore, is expressively real. Indeed, it is the living foundation of a truly Christian, thus ethical life. And it works, not in the sense of causative function but via the infused disposition of God’s own relational love. Michael Casey, OCSO (another monastic voice), states the issue at hand plainly, whilst also drawing on the insights of Friedrich Schleiermacher:

That the divinisation of human beings is a neglected doctrine powerfully reveals the impoverishment of Christian faith that we have allowed to occur. It is easy enough to reduce the mystery of God’s plan to a few metaphysical and ethical crumbs. Such oversimplification does not succeed in making Christianity more accessible to the ordinary person, but simply renders it banal and boring... In this age, more than any other, we need the divine boldness to affirm that Christianity is not a matter of being good but of becoming God.<sup>8</sup>

In the first semester of this academic year the theme of pastoral humility was a focus of *Integrative Ministry Practice* (IMP), an upper level Unit of the Bachelor of Ministry I teach at Uniting College, South Australia.<sup>9</sup> Two members of that cohort came readily to mind in the framing and writing this paper: One being a recently ordained Minister of the Word, the other a Deacon candidate, each pastorally active within Uniting Church in Australia (UCA).<sup>10</sup>

The Minister of the Word is serving a congregation in an ‘intentional interim’ capacity. It is a community notable for its breadth and complexity of

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Casey, *Fully Human, Fully Divine: An Interactive Christology* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2004), 9-10.

<sup>9</sup> A topic, in fact, I spoke about at the Melbourne ANZATFE Conference in 2015 in relation to the transformative place and potential of theological reflection.

<sup>10</sup> I have the permission of both ministers to speak to their experience, yet without revealing names, locations or gender. Each vetted and added to my written reflections.

theological expression. This tenuous multiplicity was further stressed following the UCA's 2018 National Assembly decision to offer two distinct pastoral/theological approaches to the request for same gender marriage. By the minister's own admission, IMP's theme of pastoral humility was a guiding light within the midst of their own need for discernment and the intention to offer ethical leadership. What emerged for them was a non-partisan positioning offered in the face of substantial pressures to conform to what was considered to be the 'true gospel,' either from the left or right side of the theological spectrum.

In short, the minister's considered expression of leadership sought to point the community towards the unifying and healing presence of Christ. That is, beyond competing brands of theology and ideology (1 Corinthians 1:13) and analogous divisive, if not derisive behaviours. And through this cruciform / unifying stance, I believe, the minister was acting in full accord with the *Uniting Church's Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice for Ministers* with its theological and pastoral stress on furthering the "faith and unity" of the Church.<sup>11</sup> And although a significant grouping of the congregation did take their leave, the minister has continued to exercise a wise and ethical presence, whilst simultaneously having to absorb a good deal of harsh judgement along the way. In sum, the minister's locus of pastoral authority has remained rooted in Christ. Indeed, it is from their receptive experience of God's own goodness, truth *and beauty* that their pastoral ethics are further shaped and given fruitful expression.

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<sup>11</sup> "Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice," in *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations 2018 with Covenanting Statement, Code of Ethics and Manual for Meetings* (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia, 2018). 1.

The Deacon candidate is a prison chaplain learning, in their own words, the active ministry of “presence and patience.” In a ministry context notable for the rendering of social ethics and punitive detention, what might a pastoral ethic then look like? Counter intuitively, it relies on what might first appear to be pastoral passivity. Yet in reality, the embodied divestment of power and privilege is intrinsic to the ethical substance and *telos* of the Christian ministry being offered. This meaning, that a deliberate, yet uncontrived, waiting space is created for genuine relational encounter to occur, wherein the giving (and receiving) of human dignity is paramount to all else.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, the UCA’s *Code of Ethics* helpfully states that the pastoral relationship is, “a relationship in which Ministers seek to express an ethic of care, which includes nurturing the other person’s power over their own life as they relate to others and to God.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, a conscious descent of empathic love for the sake of a received ascent within the much broader stream of God’s redemptive love.

I would not want to romanticise the patient gifting of space. It can be trying, if not excruciating to maintain. It may even appear foolish. For it takes perseverance and courage, often in the midst of the prevailing culture of verifiable, competitive achievement. Yet in the words of Andrew Root, this

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<sup>12</sup> See, Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 60-61. See also, Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love & Truth & Justice* (Melbourne: Penguin Press, 1999). An immigrant to Australia at an early age, Gaita offers insight into the human condition and the irreplaceable gift that is unconditional love to our continued growth and sense of well-being. In the first chapter he tells the story of a nun who worked alongside him at a psychiatric hospital. A person who, in his estimation, displayed a goodness that went well beyond the bounds of ethical virtue. There existed something about her that was life giving in itself. A goodness and spontaneity of spirit that was infectious and potentially healing for all who encountered. He writes, “In the nun’s case, her behaviour was striking not for the virtues it expressed, or even for the good it achieved, but for its power to reveal the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible. Love is the name we give to such behaviour.” 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

seeming place of human “nothingness” is paradoxically one of divine possibility:

Love is always in the motion of ministry; it is always the act of going to others to embrace their nothingness... Love is the ministry of being together by becoming, by coming to one another through nothingness. God is love (1 John 4:8) because God is on the move, because God is in ministry, becoming, seeking to give Godself to us, to be with us. Only love is on the move because only love creates possibility out of nothingness.<sup>14</sup>

By way of a written response to the above theological reflections, the chaplain in question commented:

Even today... there were moments of waiting without any conversation, and the thought crossed my mind only this afternoon: "What do I look like just waiting here?" It's one thing to find people to serve. It's another thing entirely to present yourself as available to serve, but then leave it entirely to someone else whether to take you up on the offer. It cannot be *my ministry*, because I don't force any encounter. So, it must be God's ministry. Every conversation (*which last week included, "I just want to die in here now, can you help me with that?"*) occurs because somebody else wants it to happen, and because I am entirely at their service, and because they saw me waiting and not pushing.

Perhaps such an unassuming narrative may not strike us as being particularly ethical, innovative or evangelical in relation to pastoral practice. On closer examination, though, the disciplined space created - the “waiting and not pushing” - is the very essence of a Christ-like embodiment of ethical ministry practice, I believe.

In major part, my conviction is born out of experiences of contrary pastoral stances within my own denomination that are often called to account in either counselling committees, discipline committees or, in worse case scenarios, sexual abuse complaint committees. For example, repeated transgressions of personal boundaries, the presumption to act unilaterally, a sense of

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 133.

entitlement born of gender and ecclesial role, pathological narcissism parading in the guise of God's designated prophet (Bonhoeffer's "wish-dreamer" readily comes to mind here), or just the sheer absence of any felt sense of pastoral compassion / wisdom which, in my neck of the woods, has become known as PWDS: *Pastoral Wisdom Deficit Syndrome*.

In short, due to a lack of humility honed existentially in close relation to the kenotic God, the corruptibility of pastoral practice is an ever-present danger *and* reality. In her *Introduction to Ministry Practice*, Kathleen Cahalan offers a helpful listing of what that looks like in specific terms,<sup>15</sup> whereas Pope Francis paints a broader, yet no less insightful picture. He states:

Corruption is not an act but a condition, a personal and social state in which we become accustomed to living. The corrupt man (sic) is so closed off and contented in the complacency of his own self-sufficiency that he does not allow himself to be called into question by anything or anyone. The self-confidence he has built up is based on fraudulent behaviour: he spends his life taking opportunistic shortcuts at the cost of his own and others' dignity... Corruption leads people to lose the modesty [humility] that safeguards truth, goodness and beauty.<sup>16</sup>

This paper has sought to argue that important matters of pastoral ethics need to be framed in ontological / faith terms before being prematurely 'launched' into the highly pressured worlds of function, praxis and moral virtue.

Accordingly, an active, thus discernible pastoral disposition of humility, noteworthy for its desirous and broken-hearted<sup>17</sup> reliance on the help and mercy of God (Psalm 70:1, Luke 18:9-14), is pivotal to individual and communal shalom. Ongoing formation in the truth *and* grace of Christ, therefore, is not simply a parallel or secondary trajectory to ethical, skills-based pastoral

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<sup>15</sup> Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 110-113. These are: Inattention, selfish intentions and pride (hubris).

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 83-84.

<sup>17</sup> "A truly Christian love, either to God or men, is a humble broken-hearted love. The desires of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires: their hope is an (sic) humble hope; and their joy, even when it is unspeakable, and full of glory, is a humble, broken-hearted joy, and leaves the Christian more poor in spirit, and more like a little child, and more disposed to a universal lowliness of behaviour." "Religious Affections," *Works of Jonathan Edwards* Vol. 2:339-340.



training. It is, in my considered estimation, the fertile soil in which the expressive nature of Christian ministry practice is most fully shaped and determined.

Taking his lead from life-bearing movements integral to the created order, Eugene Peterson likened Christian humility to a “wise poverty” or an emptiness in which ripeness already [mysteriously] resides, though in need of divine encouragement. I find such a poetic word picture compelling for the fruitful practice of Christian ministry in ambiguous and complex days, such as these are.

#### The Lucky Poor (*“Blessed are the Poor in Spirit”*)

*A beech tree in winter, white  
Intricacies unconcealed  
Against sky blue and billowed  
Clouds, carries in its emptiness  
Ripeness: sap ready to rise  
On signal, buds alert to burst  
To leaf. And then after a season  
Of summer a lean ring to remember  
The lush fulfilled promises.  
Empty again in wise poverty  
That lets the reaching branches stretch  
A millimetre more towards heaven,  
The bole expands ever so slightly  
And push roots into the firm  
Foundation, luck to be leafless:  
Deciduous reminder to let it go.<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, “The Lucky Poor” in *Holy Luck* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 3.