The Prophetic Role in Pastoral Care

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ABSTRACT: The Author argues that learnings in Clinical Pastoral Education may clarify the prophetic function of ministry and minimize the perennial conflict between the prophetic and the priestly. He describes "solidarity" and "confrontation" in counseling and amplifies their meaning as regards the traditional functions of the prophet.

Introduction

In September, 1977, in Eisenach (East Germany), European pastoral psychologists met to discuss improvements in pastoral care through learning together. Two study groups considered the problems of the prophetic role of the minister. In what follows I try to formulate what I learned both from the discussion in my study group and from my subsequent reflection on those discussions. Thus, this article is more than a report. One could call it the result of a process of reflection initiated by the discussion in this group.

It became clear in our group that the prophetic role of the minister caused concern at two points. The first point involved the feeling of uncertainty many ministers have when they are told that they, like psychotherapists, must be nondirective, which means reserved, not burdening their parishioners, but more accompanying, understanding, empathic. They wonder whether this stance makes their message clear and audible and whether there are not essential differences between therapy and pastoral care. Ministers, they suggest, have a double responsibility, one for the people with whom they communicate and one for the task of a minister, for the message which they must bring.

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In other words, their role is more than that of therapists who consider their task completed when the other is healthy and able to go his or her own way. Ministers have a “prophetic” task; they should show others new ways to go.

The second point of concern related to the character of our preaching. Our impression was that most of the people who come to church do so because they want to hear the “old” words; they seek to use a modern term, “comfort.” But as ministers we felt we had the task to make people “uncomfortable,” to comfort them perhaps with disagreeable truths, to draw them out, to challenge them. We thought of the prophets and were convinced that one of the central aspects of our ministry is prophecy, and that this aspect must be realized in our preaching. We defended the thesis that it is the task of the Christian community to stand in the center of the world and not to escape from its problems in a conventional piety; instead we are to study these problems realistically and responsibly and seek to do something about them.

What has become clear to me in subsequent weeks, is that we, on the basis of what we have learned in clinical pastoral education, can come to another view of the phenomenon of prophecy and therefore of the prophetic aspects of ministry. Obviously this reflection on prophecy has connections to that which is of concern for people in a certain time of history. Thus I acknowledge that the thoughts which I develop in this article reflect the influences and the prejudices of our time. However, nothing should keep us from formulating these thoughts and offering them for consideration. Every time in history is one-sided but may nevertheless disclose something of the truth.

I have grown up with the liberal view of the prophet. I learned to see him and appreciate him as the great individualist, the one who had the courage to attack the establishment of his time, to challenge kings and priests, even though he was only a simple man called to the big town by God from behind his herds. Prophets were heroes who could be taken as examples even after many centuries. My teacher at Leyden University, de Graad, saw the prophet as an important figure in the development of religion from collectivity to individuation and in this way as a key-figure in the great process of humanization in history.

Later on I understood that the distance from priest to prophet was not so great as I learned as a student. Thus the prophet had his role inside and not in an outside opposition to the cultic community. But I have learned even more of the prophet through clinical pastoral education. This approach to education has taught me to speak of the relations in terms of “solidarity” (as opposed to “compassion”) and to speak of content of this solidarity as “confrontation.” In these words,