Self-Evaluation in the Pastorate

The Problem

Being essentially self-employed while at the same time generally salaried, today’s parish minister finds himself stripped of the usual norms by which vocational fulfillment is measured and to which improvement of performance is geared in our culture. The man who is only self-employed knows that if his efforts fail to produce the desired results he may be deprived of the necessities of life. Although no supervisor is looking over his shoulder, his profit and loss statements provide him with some index by which to evaluate his work. The man who is only salaried knows that if his work does not meet certain standards, he may lose his source of livelihood; i.e., his performance is evaluated for him by the larger organization which he serves.

But the parish minister, who deals in a highly subjective coin and for whom the threat of loss of livelihood is minimized, must look elsewhere for norms and methods of self-evaluation. It is to the question of methods that this article addresses itself, not as offering an easy solution to the intricate challenge to self-criticism which confronts every Christian, but rather as offering one concrete suggestion as to what may practically be done in the pastorate to enhance the clergyman’s evaluation of and participation in his pastoral relationships. This offering will be in the form of a brief analysis and description of what has been done in a parochial situation to evaluate and sensitize the minister’s exercise of his pastorate.

It is not the intention of this article to propose new techniques for introspection. The devotional literature in various religious traditions as well as much popular “psycho-religious” material is full of these. Rather, this article proposes one way in which the contemporary pastor may evaluate his performance and involvement in certain areas in the light of the vocation to which he professes to be called. The individual’s perception of his vocation sets the norms. This article suggests a method.

1. The Need For a ‘Critical Eye.’ What has already been said points up the need of the parish minister for what might be called a “critical eye.” He
needs some method for standing outside of his pastoral involvements so as to be better able to recognize and deal with the dynamic factors at play, within himself as well as within those with whom he deals. Certainly one of the primary and traditional realms in which this kind of evaluation must be carried out is the minister’s own personal prayer life. It is here that every Christian must fulfill one of the primary conditions for creative self-appraisal, the viewing of his life and vocation in the light of a freely-acknowledged Absolute, in the light of his response and commitment to his God. But, the minister’s personal prayer life by its very nature includes neither a systematic method of data collection nor its corollary, a built-in safeguard against excessive selectivity of the involvements and relationships which will be focused upon. Perhaps something more is needed.

Another realm in which opportunities for self-evaluation have traditionally been available to the parish minister is in his relationships with parishioners and even other clergy. Many clergy report seeking out a close friend within their community with whom they can “talk it out” in regard to their concerns about vocational involvement and fulfillment. This “friend” may be another clergyman, or he may be a layman of another church whose ability to be helpful is predicated on his lack of involvement in the affairs of one’s own parish. He may even be a therapist consulted professionally. Whatever his identity, his role as determined by the minister who seeks him out is, among other things, to be a sounding board for the self-evaluation of the minister. But, even in this kind of relationship, the acknowledgement of an authoritative vocational norm (a theological point of view) may be lacking, and data collection (such as it is) is still highly eclectic and more oriented toward a therapeutic resolution of the anxieties of the minister than toward a creative analysis of his pastoral relationships.

2. The Need for Supervision. The limitations of these traditional resources of the pastor for self-evaluation serve to point up the need for supervision in this process, a need recognized implicitly in the structure of the Church from New Testament times and explicitly in the last three decades in the popularization of clinical pastoral training. A well-trained pastoral supervisor is in a position not only to focus the wealth of his own experience and pastoral skills on the relationships brought to him by a minister, but also to impose and enforce that discipline which is a prerequisite to a minister taking a thorough and honest look at his pastoral involvements. Certainly this kind of oversight is implied in the concept of the episkopos in the early Church, and in the evolving relationship between a Bishop and his priests who are ordained to exercise his pastorate. Episcopalians and Roman Catholics refer to their Bishop as “Reverend Father in God,” and overtly define his role as in part a spiritual counselor to his clergy. Sadly perhaps, it must be acknowledged by the clergy that this element in our tradition has been almost totally lost. The contemporary episcopate (including those other denominational leaders in a supervisory capacity who implicitly lay claim to the episcopate) has by and large abdicated its pastoral responsibilities under the burden of the world’s demands that the Church conform to secular criteria of success—that its recognized leaders be primarily administrators and experts in public relations.

In recognizing this lack of trained and qualified pastoral supervision, the movement for more supervised clinical training for theological students has