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The Brotherly Task

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Between the years 1951 and 1956 I sat out there where you are with enough regularity that no one ever got overly concerned about my spiritual condition. Back in those days, it seems to me, there was less concern about the "spiritual condition" and more concern about chapel attendance. I think that's progress. During those years I sat out there I remembered thinking, frequently, that I did not want to be up here in the chancel—ever!—that the good place to be was out there—not up here. I was right; but as we say: That's my problem.

I am programmed to talk for at least forty-five minutes on almost any aspect of the struggles and vicissitudes of the parish ministry. I am not going to do that today, but I do want to lift up a couple of things about the ministry. The ministry has changed over the past thirty years, changed a lot. Thank God it has changed, because the world has changed, and that's what the ministry is for—the world. Most observers feel that the rate of change in our world is rapidly increasing, almost at an exponential rate. And that means of course that the ministry must also change. I am not suggesting that the parish is on the crest of a great wave of change. It certainly is not. But the ripples do reach the backwaters.

And what changes there are in the expectations people have about the pastor!

Let's start with you and your expectations. Something got you into this business . . . the hero worship of a boy at seven—an adolescent dream—some subtle parental molding—a desire for instant sagacity—the vision of a quiet contemplative life in the midst of frantic urban bustle—the boldness of a man of God who speaks the truth. Whatever they were, some kinds of expectations got you in this far. And each man here can document the alterations in his own expectations about the ministry over the years—the erosion of some, the growth of others.

But believe me when I say that whatever your expectations are now, they will not match those of the pastor who lives closest to you, nor will they match those of your circuit counselor, nor of your District mission executive. Nor will they match those of the president of the "Frauenverein," or the Sunday school superintendent, or eight out of nine elders.

And it's not because you are right and they are wrong, or that they are all right and you are wrong. They don't agree with each other either. There are all kinds of sanctioners functioning, ready to say aye or nay to your professional activity, but there is a horrendous lack of consensus among them.

Do you see the implications? Creative! You can be your own man! No matter what you do, some will smile, others will

scowl. Nobody hands you a ministry. You get a call—that's people and maybe a place. And you get an ordination—that's your union card which means you can go to work. But if you want a ministry, you are going to have to fight for it. You are going to have to chisel it out, one chip at a time, by thinking clearly, by being available and vulnerable, by integrity, strength, genuineness, and by reading your own entrails.

That's a big order. It demands a lot of you—as a man. If you go at it with all this, *you will be lonely*. Most of us need the understanding and approval of people. For the man who opts for the ministry there is only a limited supply of smiles, affirmative nods, and approving noises. And that's bad, and that hurts. Self-esteem begins to slide, later on efficiency, and after a while the pastorate continues—but the ministry has ended.

That is what I see at stake when we consider our "style of life in God"—your ministry and mine.

Three things concern me as central. If you can forgive my tired homiletical style, I'll call them the three R's: rapport, reverence, and resistance. To keep a ministry going, you need these three. Let go of any one, and down she goes.

I

Christianity and community are two words that overlap each other in meaning and are sufficiently interconnected that it is difficult, if not impossible, to think of any form of Christianity that could be separated from some communal expression. There is a current rash of concern about community, be that a worshiping community in a church, or therapeutic com-

munity in a mental hospital, or even a commune made up of alienated youth looking for the good life in agrarian simplicity. People with people—that's the simplest definition of community. But it doesn't always work. Put people with people and they get in each other's way. They waste a lot of energy pulling in opposite directions. They dynamite one another's foundations, scuttle one another's little boats, and blast one another out of the saddle. That can't be community—though it does begin to sound like a denomination I've heard about, and like some congregations I've heard about, and like some pastoral conferences I've heard about. People with people is not enough to have community. Something else is needed. They must be really *with* each other and *for* each other. I'm calling that rapport.

There is no such thing as instant rapport that can be brought into being by pouring boiling water—or any other potent liquid for that matter—on some freeze-dried crystals. Building rapport takes time, hours, days, years.

And rapport takes a lot more than time. Openness and trust is a good phrase. Honesty, risking yourself, showing your cards, all of them—even the trump card tucked up your sleeve. Showing weakness that is in the final analysis only humanness. And dealing with the weakness that others expose in a way that is both critical and reverent and therefore helpful. Building rapport is hard work because it is done between the Scylla of frightened isolation and the Charybdis of goeey sentimentality, and because it is done *by you* on your own soul.

That's rapport. It makes community. You need it as a man, and as a man in

Christ, and for your ministry. It takes time and openness and trust. You can build it with your wife, or with friends inside or outside the congregation, or with fellow clergy, or with somebody else, but you must build it somewhere and with someone. A seminary share group can be a training ground for this task—likewise the groups constructed around this curricular experiment. But it can't stop here in this place. In-depth community with somebody is a continuing necessity.

II

Then there is reverence, the deliberate self-conscious calling to awareness of the presence and power of Christ. He is, so we can. Against whatever kind of background, counter to whatever our immediate existential evidence might be, Christ is. The need to do this calling to awareness is terribly human—to remind yourself, to touch base with the familiar center of your life, the stone worn smooth by much touching. But awareness fades—as you will remember. One needs to touch again and again. One needs to schedule and discipline the touching. It needs to be fitted to the rhythm of the year or of the day or the rhythm of your life.

Pay attention to the word "fitted." How and when and where and with whom are important considerations. Personally I have always been a little distressed by the people who practice what I call "instant prayer." Anytime, anywhere, with anyone, to immediately break forth in extemporaneous vocal prayer has always struck me a little like the charwoman calling the corporation president "Buster." It's like instant intimacy—I'm not wired that way. Instant prayer is something I can't do, and

it has never done much for me; but it works for some, and they must do it. Whatever method of calling to awareness you use, it must be yours. The variety is infinite. Blessed Martin's Gargantuan wrestling—Malcolm Boyd's hip-casual conversation with what seems to be a terribly cool Jesus—Don Camillo's hallucinatory dialogs with the figure on the crucifix in his Italian village church—Saul Bellow's Henderson with his desperate blurted prayers half in the language of Henderson, pig farmer, and half in the language of the Book of Common Prayer—everything, in fact, from the "Abba, Vater, Amen" of a 2-year-old or the repetitious babbling of "eleison Iēsou" of an Orthodox monk all the way to a chanted choral Eucharist. Whatever the method of calling to awareness, it must be yours—for you. Include, if you can, the preacher I know, who in moments of utter exasperation says "Christ" through clenched teeth and then hastily explains to those who heard it that it was a prayer, not a curse. Even include if you can the young man at Washington University who came out of a building one night to find the ground covered with snow, shook his fist at the sky, and said, "I'm through with You."

The call to awareness of Christ and His presence and power must be done your way. You must find what your way is. Some are blessed with breadth and can use many ways—"Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" and the B-minor Mass communicate equally. For most of us it's not that easy. And that brings me to my last R—resistance.

III

Some have read this entire program as having a devious thread running through

it. Some have read this program as a tricky way to con them out of their resistance to being programmed in some particular pious practice. If you have been reading this program that way, I think you have been reading it wrong. If, however, you are right in your suspicions, if the designers of this program set for themselves the task of maneuvering around your resistances, then I'm going to do what I can right now to wreck that scheme, because your resistances are important. We have had enough of assembly line pastors with interchangeable parts. God made us men. God made us different. The gifts we bring to the church had better be different, individualized gifts, for the church needs all kinds of things today. Somebody else's pious practice may do wonders for him. Perhaps you should try it for yourself, really try it. It may do wonders for you too. If so, continue it, your search is over. Or it may do nothing for you. If so, stop it. Your search is not over. Take your resistances seriously. Don't mock them — mark them well. It could be that old familiar authority-balking negativistic stubbornness, or it could be your uniqueness crying out for sustenance. No one can be sure, but you must decide and act accordingly.

Your resistance will cause you to test and question the rapport that is built. It will palpate and pinch and press upon each

remembering and each reverencing. If you should wake up some morning and find your resistance suddenly gone, don't think you have suddenly gotten better. The truth is you have died.

When this program was begun, I was here for the opening remarks by John Tietjen. At one point I was struck by his manner and his message. He was, I thought, gently and winsomely pleading, pleading with seminarians that they not boycott and thereby abort the whole experiment. Pleading with them that they, of all things, read the Book devotionally and pray and submit themselves to some mutually agreed-upon pious practice. There are some who would find his pleading scandalous. Pleading with seminarians? to pray? But it was not scandalous. It was right on. Resistance is not simply to be squashed. Resistance needs to be dealt with gently, with understanding.

In an electrical conductor resistance produces heat. In a man who would minister, resistance can produce individuality, strength, integrity, all needed by the church; and sometimes resistance can produce the warmth of grace and freedom — which we need desperately.

You need four things for the ministry. You need rapport, reverence, resistance, and Christ. And Christ is yours.

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