

The Priest as Moral Educator and Pastoral Moral Guide

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Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end. Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that "a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties". The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality (Pope Francis – Amoris Laetitia 305).

In an age of rampant individualism, faith asks that we stand for family and community. In a time of intense consumerism, faith summons us to uphold the principle that it is not what we have that counts, but rather how we treat one another with dignity. In an epoch that does not value permanence or hard work in relationships, faith demands that we believe marriage is forever and children are a blessing, not a burden. In an era of growing isolation, we are reminded by our faith that our nation has a responsibility to the bigger world, to pursue peace, to welcome immigrants, to protect the lives of the lost, the least, and the last, to live by the principle of solidarity. In a stage where the gap between the rich and poor continuously widens, our faith insists on its authenticity in our lives by how we treat and care for the weakest among us.

During these challenging times, the Catholic community needs to be a source of clear moral vision and effective action. As community, our faith calls us to be the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (cf. Mt 5:13-16). This is a task of every believer, parish, and Christian community. Moral vision and effective action for social undertaking can only come about

through an effective moral education. Moral education is an essential part of what makes a parish Catholic.

In urban neighborhoods, in suburban communities, and in rural areas, parishes serve as anchors of hope and communities of caring, help families meet their own needs and reach out to others, and serve as centers of community life and networks of assistance.

Pope Francis in his encyclical *EvangeliiGaudium* further appreciates the role of the parish today:

The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptability, it continues to be “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters”. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship, and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented (no. 28).

Reflecting on these words of Pope Francis, we can see that the parish community has a special role in promoting participation in the life, mission, and work of the faith community.

The parish is where the Church lives. The parish, locally organized under the guidance of a pastor who takes the place or stead of a bishop, is a community of faith, of action, and of hope, enlightened and supported by the Word of God, given the task of proclamation and catechesis that reveal the mystery of Christ in its fullness and implications. It is where the Gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth. The parish is the home of the Christian community; it is the heart of our Church. The parish is the place where God's people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church's life. The parish is a community of love where the reality of communion is lived out in concrete actions. Its point of departure is the Eucharist through which sisterhood and brotherhood of the disciples of Lord are transformed into service, reciprocal love, and witness. It is a community of prayer, especially on the Day of the Lord, through the action of the sacraments being celebrated, particularly the Eucharist which is the source and summit of the liturgical action.

The above understanding of the parish truly seals the centrality of the parish in the formation of the faithful. The parish, the Church that lives among the homes of the people, continues to be the fundamental place for the communication of the Gospel and the formation of the consciences of the believers. Within a given territory, it represents the immediate reference to education and Christian life on the level accessible to all. It favors exchange and encounter among the different generations. It dialogues with local institutions and it establishes educational alliances in service of humanity.

In this context, directly touching us and investing us with responsibility, the role of the priest becomes clear. He is the guide of the community who constitutes and focuses on the parochial organization in his structural plan. Moral formation or education is one function of the priest worth special mention. Inevitably, the priest is at the center of the renewed attempt ensuring that the parish becomes a permanent laboratory in the building of the Christian way of life – individual and communitarian. He must possess competence – native, developed, and exercised or applied.

It is precisely in the understanding of the important roles of the parish priest in the Christian community that this discussion wants to focus its reflection. There are three roles considered important for the parish priest fulfill: moral education and pastoral moral guidance, prophecy, and healing. We shall take only first role in this discussion.