

Chaplain's Reflection — October 3, 2011 — © Very Rev. Steven Belonick

"Feed My sheep" (John 21:17).

Thus far in my essays on priestly formation, I have presented human and spiritual formation as essential components for pastoral work. Without *pastoral* formation, however, they remain incomplete, and pastoral work remains impoverished. Growth in "pastoral sensitivity" and "pastoral charity," though certainly a grace from the hand of God, can be cultivated. It can be "taught and caught." Therefore, it must be the responsibility of seminary training, just like human and spiritual formation.

Those who are called to priestly ministry can never presume ownership of this ministry, for there is only One True Priest and Pastor, who is Christ Himself. He must remain the guide, support, and source of all pastoral work. Everything flows from Him, and everything must flow toward Him. We must learn how to become bearers of and transparent to the One Shepherd of souls.

Therefore, pastoral work is not just a set of techniques or skills, even though pastors need to be skilled. It is, first and foremost, a work that needs to be grounded in a "spirit of pastoral service" to use a phrase coined by Archbishop John Shahovskoy in his classic book, *The Orthodox Pastor* (SVS Press, 2008).

So, what are some of the qualities that need to be nurtured through pastoral formation? Here are some thoughts.

Pastoral formation seeks to instill in candidates:

- *a heart that is "other-centered."* Jesus came "to serve and not to be served." He taught that pastoral leadership could not be based on the earthly model of "lordship" over others (Matt 20:25-28). He gave us another leadership model when He washed the feet of His disciples.
- *a heart that is willing to accept a life of sacrifice for the sake of the gospel.* Jesus was willing to lay down his life voluntarily for His sheep. Those who follow Him in pastoral work also must accept this life voluntarily. It is an easy yoke for those who love Him. Apostle Paul also expressed this kind of sentiment when he wrote: "I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith. I am glad and rejoice with you all" (Phil 4:17). Pastors must live their lives for the sake of the gospel and as an example to their flock. Again, to quote Archbishop John Shahovskoy, "...much that is permissible for a layman is sinful for a priest."
- *a heart that desires to truly know and engage their flock.* Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (John 10:27). Pastors are patient to allow trust to develop. When it does, pastors come to know those under their care — their strengths and weaknesses; their fears and anxieties; their sins and hidden secrets. The pastor's aim is to be truly a spiritual father, recognizing that each human soul is priceless. "He is a spiritual architect, a builder of souls. He prepares and tills the soil. He sows seeds, waters the plants, weeds, and protects each plant from thieves and birds. He cannot show

favoritism but must do his utmost to make himself equally close to all, and all equally close to him" (Archbishop John Shahovskoy).

- *a heart that is receptive to the diversity in a community.* Pastors meet and minister to people from a multitude of backgrounds, cultures, and histories. He must be able to effectively minister to each and learn to love each, shedding off any of his personal biases.
- *a heart for leadership, which is willing to discover the royal priesthood of each person and to find ways for it to mature.* He learns to trust in the God-given talents and abilities of his people, and nurtures those gifts. He runs from the temptation to do everything himself, which is nothing more than self-seeking pride.
- *a heart that reaches out to the unchurched, the skeptical, and the disenfranchised.* He knows the riches of the life in Christ and wishes to offer it to others. His eyes are turned not only inward toward the community but also outward to those who have not yet found Christ.
- *a heart that remembers that the work of each parish community is to be an extension of Christ Himself,* as challenging as that may be, and not to settle for or to be an agent in reducing it to a comfortable entity unto itself.
- *a heart that understands the need to integrate the care of souls and the life of the Church.* Father Alexander Schmemmann, in an essay written in the late 1950s entitled "Some Remarks on Pastoral Theology," wrote:

The priest is first of all the minister of the Church, and his ministry must be defined as the edification of the Church. His three functions: the priest, the teacher, and the pastor, are not three independent spheres of activity, but ultimately rooted in one and the same reality: that of the Church, the Body of Christ, new life, granted in Christ, and they all have one common goal: the growth of the Church into the full of Christ's stature.

As pastor, the priest is not just a therapist. As priest, he is not just a dispenser of sacraments. As teacher, he is not just an academic. Instead, the pastor understands how to integrate each of these specific functions for the building up of the Body of Christ and for identifying the Church's "relevance to all situations." He is always pointing to the "new life" given in Christ and offered in His Church.

Pastoral formation is a very far-reaching and complex topic. It is certainly a challenge for a seminary education to imbue "the spirit of pastoral service" in its students. It is equally a challenge for students to open their hearts during their seminary years and throughout their lifetime to allow the One True Pastor to continue to shape them and allow this spirit to guide their work. But the fruit of pastoral formation is worth it.

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