PASTORAL COUNSELING IN RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT:

Reflections for the Wellesley College Counseling Staff

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Pastoral counseling may be the second oldest profession in the world. Or, if we consider the multidisciplinary rule of the shaman or the priest in archaic societies, we might say that pastoral counseling is, indeed, itself the oldest profession in the world.

Be that as it may, our image of the history of pastoral counseling probably ranges from the fastidious to the tyrannical, all the way from the bubbling, sweetness-and-light, lace-covered village priest of Victorian England to the devouring, dominating moral enforcer of puritan New England. In fact, however, notwithstanding such excesses, and notwithstanding the arcane resonance of traditional expressions such as "the cure of souls," the priest-counselor figure has often been at the center of cmmunity life: as one whose role has been to minister to persons in their wholeness, to explore the depths of human suffering and the heights of human joy, to seek, as well as to impart, wisdom, and to raise questions, as well as to make pronouncements, about individual and social righteousness.

Pastoral counseling as we know it today, however, is definitely a post-freudian phenomenon. The emergence of the psychoanalytic movement, above all the work of Freud, posed a profound challenge to the self-understanding of the priest-counselor figure. This was not so much because of the Freudian notion that religion is an illusion, because theories of that kind, from David Hume to Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx, were wall-known and critically appropriated. The Freudian challenge was felt mainly at the point where the pastoral counselor was seen chiefly, if not exclusively, in terms of his or her superego functions. The image of the pastoral counselor as the socially sanctioned voice of public morality, whose function it was to reinforce and to that degree oppress individual psyches through excessive and unrealistic moral demands -- that image was all too close to the truth, especially in the context of middle class society, and therefore it was received as a fundamental challenge, even a crisis of self-understanding.

In response to the Freudian challenge^ we have witnessed a plethora of superficial experiments by pastoral counselors, especially in the last two decades. These experiments run a gamut from middleclass self-help therapies, & la Norman Vincent Reale, to exercises in bodily awareness and sexual encounters, often identified with institutions such as Esalin and other centers fo,r "spiritual and personal growth."

In the midst of this profusion of confusion, however, some deeper trends can be identified. This can be done under the rubric of the Freudian tripartite psychology: id, ego, superego.

First, we are witnessing a greater appreciation for the unconscious aspects of the self on the part of pastoral counselors, both in negative terms (here the traditional idea of original sin has gained a new curratcy) and in positive ways (here Freud has often been found wanting, and others, such as Jung or the great mystics, have served as teachers). People are being seen as profoundly shaped by libidinal and aggressive energies, on the one hand, and as having deep inner resources for healing and integration, on the other hand.

Second, in the wake of the development of ego-psychology, especially in America, above all by Erikson, and influenced by a new "theology of maturity" espoused by thinkers such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastoral counseling has shown increased interest in recent years in the theme of personal growth and the cultivation of maturity.

Third, in the wake of the tragedies of this century, such as the Holocaust, there has been a renewed interest in the dimensions of the superego in pastoral counseling, a renewed concern for the importance of value-formation, both in personal and social terms. In this context, values are seen not in a negative Freudian mode, but in a more traditional positive way, reminiscent of biblical Hebraism, where the Law is seen not as a tyrannt, but as a delight, as a way to human fulfilment. This interest in value-formation has developed hand-in-hand with a critique of the implicit value-formation in some kinds of "value-free" therapies, which actually have as their ultimate value "adjustment" to the status quo. Who really wants to "lead a more productive life" if the end result is to be a world of Three Mile Islands and the daily threat of nuclear overkill?

Permeating each of these trends, we can also see a new appreciation for the therapeutic and salvific value of traditional symbols and their narrative settings. When "my story" can be seen in terms of the story" of the people of God, for example, when my own inner life can resonate with the anguish of a Job or the joy of the Song of Songs, when I can identify with a "creative minority" that keeps alive the vision of social jus tice, when I can venture to believe that one day right and peace and joy will triumph, notwithstanding the brokenness of the people's present experience, then I can find a new inner meaning and power and purpose for my life, that transcends the so-called realism of Freud and his notion of "adjustment to harsh reality." A corollary of all this renewed appreciation for symbol and narrative is a critical^awareness that other forms of therapy and counseling also have their syfool systems and their implicit narrative schemas. For all his concern with medical, empirical exactness, for example, Freud ranged far and wide in the world of symbol and narrative, as his basic concepts indicate, from the Bedipus complex to the notions of Eros and Thanatos. Likewise for the more behavioral ideas, such as id, ego, and superego: they are intellectual constructs, no more or no less real in principle^ than soul or spirit or centered-self or other (theological) constructs.

But the self-understanding of pastoral counseling, notwithstanding the emergence of these deeper trends, is still very much in flux. Larger questions^ such as the meaning of God in human life, the problem of theodicy, the challenge of human and ecological community in a fragmenting world, the meanings of health and salvation and their interrelations -- such questions are very much alive for this ancient but still fledgling discipline. The discussion goes on now within the circles of those who do pastoral counseling: much less under the external force of the challenge from psychoanalysis, much more from the internal pressure of questions posed by our own life experiences in this century, as we try to remain faithful to our various traditions and serve others in, the name of healing.

The pastoral counselor is thus very much a viator, one who is underway. The deeper trends of the discipline's own history, and the many searching questions that emerge from both the contemporary spiritual situation and the claims of particular traditions — all these make it an exciting, if perplexing, time to be a pastoral counselor. One must constantly think on one's feet, as it were, both with regard to the practice of the art and with regard to the articulation of its nature and function.

Actually, the image of the pastoral counselor as viator suggests not only an existential condition, but also a substantive paradigm. One working model or practical image for the pastoral counselor today is the fellow pilgrim, or the friend along the way. Parallel phenomena can be observed in other contexts, for example, the "existential therapy" of a Rollo May or the "logotherapy" of a Victor Franks1. But this model is essentially theological.

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Friendship as a paradigm for pastoral counseling unites two polar elements, engagement and discernment. On the one hand, the pastoral counselor seeks to engage himself or herself in a covenantal relationship with the counselee, in which context the pastoral counselor is free to model — however indirectly — the unconditional and unwavering love(agape) of God, yet in a way that allows the counselor always to be one who is mortal, fully human, a creature of the earth like every other, indeed a sinful creature who, like every other human, is also needful of God's unconditional and unwavering love. This means that the counselor is present to the counselee as one who is also a pilgrim, as one who struggles, and who knows failure, as one who is blessed, and who knows joy.

On the other hand, the pastoral counselor seeks to discern what the concrete situation of the counselee actually is. Humanity does not live by bread alone, surely. But it does live by bread also. And it is decisively important for the processes of healing and salvation to be able to discern such differing needs. In this context, the analytical tools offered by the psychoanalytic movement have been enormously helpful to pastoral counselors, not so much as ends in themselves, but mainly as guides to keep the pastoral counselor from becoming, unknowingly, an object, an "It," in some manipulative acting-out of the counselee, conscious or unconscious. Conversely, psychoanalytic insights have proved most helpful, especially through various training programs, in alerting pastoral counselors to their own histories and their own needs as these may or may not impact on the counseling relationship. Sociological insights, furthermore, have been no less helpful. A person who lives in a slum will have radically different needs to be heard and responded to than one who lives in a more affluent, more stable environment("I do not want to be liberated into a burning house," said one black playwright). Likewise for a woman who has been socialized to be passive or to fear success. Sociological analysis is of utmost importance for the kind of discernment that pastoral counseling requires. Yet the base line for the discernment will, as a matter of course, always be theological. The counselor will always ask hinself or herself this kind of question as he or she interacts with the person seeking counseling: how can this particular individual be liberated, so as to find the kind of fulfilling and caring life that God has created him or her to live? Here the pastoral counselor's own familiarity with the resources — the symbols, the rites, the wealth of practical experience — of his or her own particular religious tradition^ along with the vitality of his or her own participation in that tradition as a living reality, will be decisive.

This sketch of pastoral counseling, it should be noted, focuses,on what in my view is the "mainstream," as far as developments in the field are concerned. Other interpreters will see things differently. For the sake of completeness, then, I want to point to two other developments, to the right and to the left of what is my judgment is the mainstream. On the one hand, we can notice a revival of interest on the theological right in a more directive, more prescriptive kind of pastoral counseling(focusing especially on issues of personal morality). On the other hand, we can see the continued existence of a group of pastoral counselors, on the theological left, who see themselves primarily as therapists, as professional counselors who just happen to be working, as it were, in a religious vocation. The mainstream, in contrast, as I have tried to indicate, is both open to a variety of post-Freudian and other socio-culural influences and attentive, as well, to the religious identity of the counselor and the importance of religious symbols generally in the practice of pastoral counseling.