

On the Ethics of Clergy Transitions and Boundaries

For the purposes of this procedure, the term "Rector or Priest" may be applied to vicars, assisting clergy and deacons. The purpose of this paper is to address the sensitive issue that can arise when clergy are invited into a pastoral role by persons who are no longer under their care.

As clergy, bound together by our common mission, and accountable to each other, as well as to the whole church, to foster healthy ministry in all our congregations, we seek a professional ethic that understands and respects the ending of pastoral relationships. That is, when a priest leaves a congregation the pastoral relationships end.

It is understood as a starting point that nearly everything surrounding relationships and transition is sensitive in nature. Inherent in every professional pastoral relationship is a personal relationship. This mix of relationships goes to the very being of who we see and experience ourselves to be as priests in God's church. Without both, none of us could function effectively as pastors to those who have called us into their lives in this role.

It is our experience that boundary issues grow out of healthy pastoral relationships. Said another way, when a good healthy pastoral relationship has been formed, is also when it is most natural for people to seek the presence of the pastor that is known to them, even when that relationship has ended. Weddings, baptisms and funerals are the most common points of a person's life where they might instinctively reach out to a former pastor. In fact we can almost expect that these times will often bring requests to participate.

From the clergy perspective it is both flattering and alluring to be asked to enter people's lives in the ways we have been trained to do. To be asked to be at the bedside of a family member who is dying is to be asked to be who we are. This circumstance, as well as others, are not situations to which we easily say no.

It is understood that, because of the nature of pastoral relationships, on occasion, personal friendships might also develop in the context of the pastoral. Such situations are only natural. However, they should not be taken lightly by the former rector. On a professional level self-examination should take place that asks first and foremost, how much of me is looking to my professional life, that is my pastoral relationships, for my personal friendships? At the same time other questions should be addressed. How do such friendships come to be? How many such friendships do I seem to develop in the context of pastoral relationships? Am I willing and or able to continue these friendships after I leave the pastoral role? What emotional toll will be involved to continue these relationships or, not continue them? What affect could my continuing these friendships have on others with whom I had a pastoral relationship but, choose not to continue with a friendship? There are no certain or clear answers to these questions. However, such issues should be openly and honestly addressed with one's bishop and or spiritual advisor.

It is understood that the most important relationship in dealing with the ethics of clergy transition and boundaries is the one between the former pastor and the new pastor. It is our belief that when this relationship is open, honest and healthy, boundary issues will rarely be a

problem. One of the single biggest assets in a new priest beginning his or her ministry is the support and collegial friendship of the previous rector.

It is also understood that it is the responsibility of the former rector to enforce boundary issues. It is not the responsibility of the new rector to have to react to awkward situations that come unexpectedly. It is critical in maintaining appropriate boundaries that the former rector be firm and clear in his/her commitment to appropriate boundaries. It is only under limited circumstances that contact with a former parishioner be initiated by the former rector.

Assuming this, then the situation most commonly addressed is the former parish member contacting a former rector to act again in the pastoral role. In such circumstances it is the responsibility of the former rector to respond appropriately. Such response should be automatic, "I'm really sorry, but it is simply not appropriate for me to do that. You must understand that I care about you, but I am not your pastor anymore." You might even consider giving the new rector a "plug" such as "I know your new rector will do a wonderful job for you at this time." After such a contact it is important that you call the new rector and let him/her know that the contact was made and how you responded. Most critical, when a former parishioner contacts you, is to not fall into the trap of saying something like, "You'll have to talk to the new rector about that, I really can't do it without his/her permission." Often such a response is thought to be out of respect to the new rector. However, the opposite is true. Such a response puts the new rector in a difficult situation. It leaves the new rector in the unenviable position of either relinquishing the pastoral role or saying no and being judged as unresponsive at best and, at worst, uncaring to the pastoral need.

It should also be noted that should a former rector decide to attend a program or worship service at the former parish, they should notify the current rector prior to the event. Consequently, the former rector should treat his/her presence among the community in a discreet manner so as not to distract from the pastoral role of the new rector.

It has been our experience that most clergy are very clear about these matters most of the time. We do need to remember that our former congregations are best served when we respect the boundaries by which we have ordered our lives and ministries.

*Used with permission from The Rt. Rev. Mark M. Beckwith
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