

## Healthy Boundaries: Working Guidelines and Personal Strategies

In this concluding section, I want to offer some suggestions and strategies to help us arrive at a sense of confidence and peace in our ministry. Priestly service in the contemporary church calls for a clarity of vision and a strong personal motivation in providing effective pastoral care.

# BOUNDARIES

### Some Working Guidelines

1. Because of their education, gender, role, and status, priests inherently have more power than staff members, parishioners, and others in their care. This reality is often difficult for priests to accept, because they see themselves as servants, and often experience themselves as not having significant power or influence in church life and polity.
2. This imbalance of power creates the need for increased sensitivity to and responsibility for the complex and fluid nature of interpersonal boundaries on the part of the priest.
3. More specifically, the power differential in ministerial relationships creates a situation in which those who come to us for pastoral care are vulnerable to abuse or to the violation of their boundaries. We, in turn, because of our position, are at risk, consciously or unconsciously, of misusing our power and position.
4. The responsibility for maintaining proper boundaries lies first and foremost with the priest, and only secondarily with the parishioner or others who come to him for pastoral care.
5. Unlike many other helping professions (e.g., physicians, psychologists, psychotherapists), priests inevitably find themselves in some form of dual relationships. For example, the same parishioner, who presides at the parish council one night, may celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with him the next day, and then invite him to a family dinner after the weekend liturgies. These overlapping roles are built in to pastoral ministry and therefore demand an even greater sense of awareness and responsibility.
6. It is an abuse of ministerial responsibility and a violation of boundaries for a priest to sexualize a relationship with a parishioner or someone under his care, even if it appears that the other person is aware, consenting, or even initiating the further level of intimacy.
7. The ethical violation involved in these instances is, in the first place, an abuse of power and a violation of the sacred trust inherent in the office itself. It is also a breach of the priest's commitment to celibacy.

8. Many persons who seek out priests for further pastoral contact do so because they carry an unconscious or subconscious awareness that their own sense of boundaries needs healing or completion. They have already experienced some earlier form of "relational trauma" and are seeking a safe place or person with whom to work through this core issue in their lives. "Because of the climate of violence in family life, many women - and some men - have experienced only an abusive relationship with a father. Thus to find themselves in the presence of an attentive male is to know for the first time an authority figure who cares about them."<sup>4</sup>

### Some Personal Strategies In Keeping Healthy Boundaries

1. We can begin with the importance of growth in self-knowledge. As ministers to God's people we have a responsibility to come to know our own family of origin stories, our gifts and limitations, our conscious and unconscious needs.
2. Investment in our own healing and wholeness. While it is true that the clear goal of ministry is to "lay down our lives for others" (cf. John 15:13), we cannot do this effectively if we are not also in the process of "taking up" our own lives (cf. John 10:17-18). There are many ways that we can continue this healing journey, including our willingness to work with a spiritual director or enter personal therapy.
3. Continue to develop a personal support network and close friendships. This includes coming to an awareness of the various levels and circles of intimacy in our lives. One of the signs of maturity is our ability to name and know the difference between the circle of relationships that makes up our primary level of intimacy (our closest friends or family) and those relationships which function as our secondary level of intimacy or community (other staff members, parishioners, etc.). If the first level is healthy and in place, we will be much more comfortable serving on the second level.
4. Invest time and energy in theological updating, professional development, continuing education, and, if it is appropriate, programs of certification as part of our commitment to priestly service. This should also include training and consultation to help us recognize when to refer to other helping professionals. A vital part of pastoral ministry is getting to know which helping professionals we can trust as referral sources.
5. Take initiatives to get professional and pastoral supervision. In today's complex world it is helpful to have someone you respect and trust with whom you can consult confidentially regarding your pastoral style and relationships.
6. Return again and again to the basics of a solid prayer life and the model of gospel ministry found in Jesus. In addition, since human wholeness is an integral part of the journey of discipleship, continue to attend to the practical, daily concerns of

and ways to engage your creative imagination.  
In our day to day pastoral contacts with people, approach each encounter as if we want our closest associates and friends - those who respect and trust us most - to know exactly how we are conducting ourselves.  
Finally, remind ourselves often that ministry is a gift to be offered, not a program to be imposed. In the end, pastoral care is not something we do to people or even for people, but a gift of presence that we share with people.

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<sup>4</sup> James B. Ashbrook, *Minding the Soul: Pastoral Counseling as Remembering* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 143.