

Philosophy of Man and Pastoral Theology
Conference Lincoln Deanery Meeting (Edited)
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There is often a great discrepancy in pastoral activity between one diocese and another, between one parish and another, and between one priest and another. Some of this is due to the differences of circumstances and some of it is due to the way different people's view man, i.e. how they view man's nature. It is to this topic that I would like to make a few comments, viz. the role of one's view of man, one's philosophy of human nature and one's pastoral action.

Before man performs any action, he must always make a judgment about which means or actions are the best, most suitable or desirable etc. Since action proceeds from judgment and since judgment is always based on some principle, i.e. some idea about the action itself and that upon which the action comes to bear, then pastoral action, insofar as it is action, is based upon some principle. Now pastoral theology, it seems to me, is the practical science in which we apply certain theological principles to our action. In fact, many of the problems in the Church today are the result of the divorce between the theological and the pastoral, e.g. how often do priests not fraternally correct someone under their pastoral care because they do not want to hurt the person's feelings. In effect, the person's feelings become the principle of pastoral action, which is dangerous indeed. But I fear that most priests suffer from this a bit. Rather than basing their fraternal correction on objective Catholic theology or principle, their pastoral approach to the faithful is often governed by their personal weaknesses or inordinate concerns for people's feelings.

It seems to me that since the work of a priest is to help people save their souls, then his pastoral action, i.e. what he does for the faithful, must be based upon two essential principles, viz. authentic/orthodox Catholic theology as taught by the Magisterium of the Church and the nature of man. Obviously, since the job of the priest is help people save their souls, then they must accept and use the teaching of the Church which is the means of salvation established by Our Lord. Therefore, no authentic pastoral action, sometimes called orthopraxis, can be divorced from the official teachings of the Church. This is why in the past in moral manuals, pastoral theology essentially comprised the administration of the sacraments. However, while essence of the priest is to offer sacrifice for the sake of his people and therefore the most pastoral thing he can do in general is to

offer Mass, nevertheless there is more to saving people's souls than offering Mass. Indeed, it is the most important, but we also know that part of saving peoples' souls is hearing their confessions, baptizing them, instructing them, good preaching, etc. The threefold munus of a priest to teach, sanctify and govern naturally flows from the essence of the priesthood. Often the first thing that must be done is preaching in order that people will obtain the salving knowledge entrusted to the Church. But pastoral theology includes more than that. Part of pastoral theology is counseling people in the concrete about what to do and what not to do, how to overcome their sin, their difficulties arising from sin and how to become perfect so that they can fulfill Christ's command to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." As the document *Veritatis splendor* rightly pointed out, our salvation, what is good and the knowledge of goodness does not come from ourselves, we must be perfected and come to knowledge of the good by the instruction of God; God tells us what is good and since the Church is the *Vox Dei*, i.e. the Voice of God, we learn what is good, what is necessary to be perfect from the Church. Hence, if a priest is to help his people to be holy, to be perfect, to do what is right, that priest must counsel according to orthodox theology and it must be his primary set of principles.

However, since it is man who is being counseled, then we must have an accurate knowledge of the nature of man. For if we have false understandings about man's nature, it can lead to a great deal of confusion and pastoral ineptness. I would like to take some time to discuss some erroneous views of the nature of man and how they have affected pastoral action and how we must learn about the nature of man the Church and from those who the Church recommends. As we know that the Church has repeatedly exhorted us "ite ad Thomam," i.e. go to Thomas, it seems to me that the safest philosophy to adopt for the sake of our pastoral action is Thomism.

There are, it seems to me, a few philosophical outlooks regarding man that are particularly dangerous. The first is the philosophy of materialism which holds that there is nothing beyond the material and, if there is, we cannot know it. This philosophy has led to a denial of the primacy of pursuing the things of the soul since for them there is no immaterial soul. Everything is at the service of the body rather than the body being for the sake of the soul. This philosophy has also denied that man has a supernatural end to which he is ordained by God. The result of this philosophy is that since nothing is beyond man to which he is called, the highest science becomes the philosophy

of man himself and within that psychology. Hence, in the last forty years, there has been many who have drained their pastoral theology of theology itself and replaced it with psychology. While one must have mental health in order to advance spiritually, nevertheless, psychology cannot be substituted for pastoral theology for two reasons. The first is that most priests are not adequately trained in psychology, but the second, more important reason is that psychology does not, in itself, take into account the final end of man. As a science, it is not directed, nor can it direct man to something beyond himself since the science is concerned with man himself.

Connected to this is the view that spirituality consists in emotions. This came from Friedrich Schleiermacher who said that piety was an emotion rather than a filial love of God and love of neighbor because he is in God's image. Piety became immanentized, i.e. it become fixated on ourselves rather than on God and this is the product of a materialistic approach to man. Hence, many priests in their pastoral actions are more concerned about people's emotions and appetites than they are about God. Obviously, people must be taken where they are at and led to the truth and that means that we have to take into account their emotional state but their emotional state, i.e. eliciting certain emotions, is not the end of our pastoral work. In fact, St. John of the Cross has rightly pointed out that any advancement in the spiritual life consists in basing our spiritual life in God and not in ourselves, our attachment to things, or the consolations they bring. Pastoral practice has often degenerated into placating people's emotions rather than helping the person to overcome their dependency on their emotional life as governing the spiritual life to an authentic self-denial by which we are able to love God perfectly. Pastoral theology must be about concretely helping people to attain their supernatural end to which they are ordained. St. Thomas tells us and we all know this from our own experience that we naturally desire perfect beatitude and we also know that all of the faculties of man are ordered to God as their end. So our pastoral action cannot degenerate into a psychology but it must be based on an understanding that man is ordained by God, to something outside of man himself, in order to be happy.

Another dangerous philosophy of man is rationalism. Rationalism essentially states that we do not derive a true intellectual understanding of things by means of the senses; rather all our knowledge is innate, i.e. within ourselves. This too has led to a type of immanentism in which people get locked up in themselves. How many of us have heard about catechetical programs in

which nothing is taught to the child but the presumption is that the child has everything in himself already. He just needs to express himself and that will be his theology. Rationalism forgets that man is a *tabula rasa*, i.e. that when the child was born, he did not have any explicit knowledge and that he needs to learn by looking outside of himself. Catechetical programs which have a rationalist view of man, and some priests in their pastoral action, just tell people to “follow their conscience” or “do what you feel” rather than taking the opportunity to teach the child or person what they need to know. Since we learn by means of the senses and since we do not have everything in ourselves, this means that priests must enact catechetical programs which provide a clear, coherent and orthodox presentation of the faith to the child or adult to the degree that they can understand it. Obviously, everything that is received is received according to the mode of the receiver and so we must take people where they are at and lead them to the truth to the degree that they can understand it. Now since most of a truths of faith can be grasped, at least, minimally with very little intelligence, there is no excuse for a priest not to teach his faithful in catechetics and preaching.

If one takes rationalism and materialism together and apply them to the moral code, which has been done in the last 100 years, it produces a very dangerous error. Materialism, since there is nothing beyond the material, leads man to think that he has no responsibility to God or freewill since freewill is immaterial. Since man is only material then he is merely the product of physical laws. Rationalism, on the other hand, proffers a negative attitude toward the body. The body is merely there, like a tool or instrument, which I can manipulate as I see fit. The irresponsibility begotten by materialism and the erroneous understanding of our body by rationalism has produced the contraceptive mentality, which we all know is a very grave pastoral problem. Contraception, despite the fact that many say it is “responsible” since one is taking one’s reproduction into one’s own hands, is not responsible at all. In fact, the very nature of contraception is to provide an avenue in which one can engage in the conjugal act without taking the natural consequences of the action which is nothing other than being irresponsible. This rationalistic mentality regarding the body also leads people to say things like “I am a woman in a man’s body,” since what I am is not connected to the body. This has eroded people’s understanding of the natural law which we shall speak of shortly. But pastors who fall prey to rationalism and materialism will find it very difficult to preach against contraception, which is why pastors must base their apostolate on an authentic view of man.

Now, often people do not hold these philosophies explicitly. Most priests would not consider themselves rationalists or materialists, but one does not have to hold something explicitly for it to be an operative principle psychologically. Because of our depraved culture and because many priests were not given a solid intellectual formation, they are very susceptible to listen to agencies like the media and polls. Since the culture we have now is the product of 500 years of bad philosophy, unless one can break psychologically with the culture and to come an explicit knowledge of the philosophies which produced our culture, it is very hard not to succumb to the easy answers given by the culture to difficult question. Those easy answers, of course, are the produce of bad philosophy. Therefore, priests must be particularly sensitive to the principles upon which they judge what they do pastorally. They should examine what their principles are to make sure that they are in accordance with Church teaching and a proper view of man's nature. The Church is often called the "expert on humanity" and this is because the Church draws not just on good philosophy but upon Scripture and Tradition which embody the teachings of God Himself.

The next dangerous philosophy that affects priests view of man and, consequently, their pastoral action is naturalism. Naturalism is an error which states that man is naturally good and that the evil he does is the result of exterior influences so that if man is left to himself he will naturally do what is right. Now it is true that man is by nature good but man's nature is a wounded nature. Even the philosophers have noticed that there is something wrong with man. They have noted that sometimes man knows what is right but does what is wrong; they know that man's perfection consists in virtue and yet man has a tendency to vice. Moreover, the Church's doctrine of Original Sin can never be removed from authentic pastoral considerations. For man's nature labors under the effects of Original Sin, viz. darkness of the intellect (which the rationalists would deny), disordered appetites (which the materialists would deny since man should just follow his appetites) and a proclivity to evil (which the naturalists would deny). Man's condition is serious since he is debilitated in doing the good. He find it hard to know what is good which is why pastors must teach the teaching of Church in their pastoral activity, which is why one of munera of the priest is to preach. He must govern his people in his pastoral action because they have a proclivity to evil which means they have a tendency to disorder and so God gave the munus of governance to the priest. Finally, since we disordered appetites, they are the first thing which must overcome in the process

of becoming holy and so the pastor must administer the sacraments, provide devotions, encourage prayer, etc. so that people can overcome their disordered passions and become holy. A priest is the remedy for the effects of Original Sin, but unless one has a grasp of Original Sin, the Church's other teachings and the nature of man, he will never fulfill his three fold munus, i.e. his three fold pastoral responsibility, to teach, sanctify and govern. The loss of the sense of the doctrine of Original Sin and a loss of a grasp of man and his nature has led to priests engaging in pastoral action which is not in congruity with their priesthood.

The last erroneous philosophy is historicism, primarily found in Hegel. Hegel essential thought that things were in a constant state of flux and could not help be in a state of flux. Therefore, things are never the same but always changing. This has resulted in people thinking that what someone says or teaches is always the product of their historical circumstances. Of course, we know this is not the case. We know through realism that essences never change and this means that man never changes. Now since Christ said that His teaching will not pass away and since He warned about teaching things contrary to His teaching, then the teachings of the Church will never change. Since pastoral action is based upon the teachings of the Church and essence of man, both which never change, then the essence of pastoral action never changes. Every generation is capable of receiving the teachings of the Church and living according to the teachings. While the circumstances change and so we must, again look where people are at, our ultimate goal in every generation is the same: to save the souls of those of that generation. Since man's essence does not change, then the vices, virtues and perfections never change. The only thing that can change is the external influences on man. An authentic pastoral theology does not seek to constantly change everything. Rather, it only changes what is necessary to bring it in more perfect conformity with the teachings of the Church and the nature of man.

Part of the historicism has been a systematic rejection of our spiritual and pastoral patrimony produced by the popes and saints through the ages. Just as the Church tells us to go the patristics to learn about Scripture, so too must we recover the pastoral teachings of the saints. The work of the saints was drawn from Catholic doctrine and applied with full knowledge of man's nature and his condition. We must recover our pastoral sensibilities by learning anew from the saints and accepting that teaching and example in pastoral action as our personal priestly patrimony and heritage.

...Finally, I would like to make a few last observations. We all know that grace builds on nature which means if we are going to increase in grace and seek to increase the grace of those under our pastoral care, we must know what man's nature is. Obviously, if we have a false understanding of man's nature, it will debility our advancement toward sanctification. We must therefore learn about man's nature and the order that God has placed within it called the natural law. There are three ways of knowing man's nature; viz. 1) revelation; 2) the nature law and 3) our own experience of ourselves and others. The teaching about man is incorporated in the teachings of the Church and so I won't say too much more about that aspect of our knowledge. Since our own experience of ourselves and others develops prudence in us and how we judge our experiences of ourselves and others is largely contingent upon our philosophical presuppositions, I will stick to making some basic comments about the natural law and its relation to pastoral action.

The Church has made it very clear, as it does in *Veritatis Splendor*, that the She takes the Thomistic teaching of the natural law as its own. This means that since we must follow the natural law in order to be saved, how we view man's nature will determine what we think we should and should not do which in turn affects our pastoral approach. St. Thomas tells us that man is ordered in himself and in his faculties towards specific goods and that ultimately man is ordered naturally toward God. Now this being the case, our pastoral action, being based on man's nature, is really about getting people to that Good to which they are ordered, viz. God.

The question, then, will be, how are we to teach the people the natural law and how are we to employ it in our pastoral work. St. Thomas says that the end of the moral life is virtue and he also says that the natural law commands the virtues, i.e. it is God's intention that we seek after and perfect ourselves by means of the virtues. This is, concretely, one of the ways that pastoral work is to be done, viz. by teaching people the virtues. Our goal is sanctified perfection and that consists in the obtainment of a high level of sanctifying grace as well as the perfection of the virtues. Hence, pastors much preach, teach and encourage people to pursue a life of virtue. We know that the highest of the virtues, i.e. the theological virtues, is charity, which consists in the love of God and the love of neighbor for the sake of God. Charity has God as its beginning and end and so virtues which help us to seek the true good help us to approach our end which is God Himself. Pastoral theology must take into account virtue and it cannot be satisfied with leaving people in their

ignorance because ignorance impedes our advance in virtue. Priests are not doing people a favor by leaving them in ignorance about what they should and should not do; in a sense, this type of pastoral behavior is inimical to the very notion of the priesthood which has as one of its munera to teach.

Lastly, we must say a bit about culture and custom. If I understand the history of the Catholic Church in the United States well enough, one of the ways that Catholicism advanced and survived in this country is because Catholics created pockets within the country where there was a Catholic culture. This culture, like all culture, is based upon a set of customs which govern the daily relationships people had. In the last forty years, Catholic Culture, not just in this country, but in virtually every country in the world, collapsed. It collapsed because man had changed his view of himself and this resulted in his changing his customs. A custom is a habitual way of doing something which is usually a public habit, i.e. a repeated way of doing something in society. Now the role of custom is first and foremost the promotion and the protection of virtue. In older cultures, for instance, courting practices were heavily regulated by the customs of the country. For instance, in the movie, *The Quiet Man*, an American comes to Ireland and finds a woman he wants to marry but because he comes from a country which lacks those customs, he is unable to see that the courtship ritual of Ireland was designed to protect and promote chastity, modesty and a reverence between people of the opposite sex. When man's view of himself changed, the customs based upon his view of himself collapsed. In the Catholic sphere, our custom used to be based upon Church teaching and the nature of man. Both of these principles have been under severe attack and this has resulted in a collapse of Catholic culture.

Pastoral activity is much easier within a Catholic culture because people are already doing, according to custom, the very thing the priest must encourage, i.e. pursuit of holiness and the living according to the natural law through virtue. Since the custom has collapsed, it has made it very difficult for people to lead an authentic Catholic life. Priests, on a pastoral level, must be aware of this. It seems to me that one of the successes of Lincoln has been to maintain some of these customs, some of the Catholic culture. However, more must be done, not just in Lincoln, but everywhere in the Catholic Church. Since the job of a priest is to help people save their souls, then a priest must work to the establishment and the maintenance of a Catholic culture and Catholic customs which make the priest's work easier and the faithful's task of saving their souls easier. Custom provides

an exterior motivation for leading a life of virtue and since that has collapsed, leading a Catholic life is harder because this exterior motivation is wanting. We must do what we can to promote activities which seek to give Catholics a sense of identity and this comes through establishing Catholic custom and culture.

How we view man is pivotal to our pastoral work and I admit my treatment here is grossly inadequate. However, I pray that what is said here can aid those who wish to make their pastoral work as good as it can be. Please be assured of my prayers for you and your pastoral work.

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