

TAKE CARE OF PRIESTS!

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02

Pastoral Supervision: Managing Psychosocial Challenges in Priestly Ministry

Dr. Sahaya G. Selvam

Consider the following cases of young priests involved in active ministry:

Father Arun has presided and preached at three masses on a Sunday morning in a town parish. The celebrations were fully attended. He delivered his sermons very well. And he felt appreciated. There were also some private and group meetings between the services. A sudden quietness descended on the church compound after the last service, which ended around 1 pm. Father Arun goes for his lunch and retires to his room. The other priest has gone to the outstations. It is 3 pm now. Father Arun is alone. He sits to watch some TV. He is physically tired, he feels dysphoric, and he does not know what to do. There is a bottle of brandy in the cupboard, leftover from a birthday celebration of the previous week. He pours a little brandy and begins to sip. The TV keeps blaring. He picks up his smartphone and begins to chat with his friends, some of whom are female. He starts sending affectionate messages to them. Does he know what is happening to him? Does he have any support in handling these situations? Did they teach him strategies to deal

with these situations during his many years of preparation for the priesthood?

Father Kumar has been hearing confessions the whole day. It is evening now, and he has had his supper with the fellow priests. He retires to his room. He tries to prepare a talk for the next day. He feels physically fatigued, though he feels fulfilled. He goes to lie on his bed. His mind drifts into some graphic sexual images. He feels lost. He has been advising people, and now he himself is tempted! Does he know what is happening to him? Does he realise the impact of all the negative discourse he has been exposed to during the confessions, not forgetting some graphic descriptions of sins? After all, the people have beaten their dirty linen on him. True, he has been dispensing the loving mercy of God in the name of the Church but is it possible that he himself has not been affected by the environment of sin? Does he know where to seek help?

Here are the jottings of one memorable day in the life of **Father Raj**, a young missionary, while on home leave: "I woke up as usual and went to celebrate the Eucharist in our village chapel, which was then not yet a parish. When I returned home from the Church, my mum announced the happy news that my niece had been born at the hospital; both the infant and the mother were hale and hearty. As I sat for breakfast, the phone rang. My mum said it was the parish priest on the line: could I go to the main parish church to bless a wedding at 10 am. A taxi was on the way to pick me up. The parish priest had to deal with an issue that had come up in the parochial school. I go to celebrate the wedding. At the parish office, I meet a gentleman from my village whose father has died, and the funeral must be held that evening (as it is customary). By the time I finish the wedding mass, it has been confirmed that I have to conduct the funeral service around 4 pm that evening back in my village. As I get back to my mum's supper that evening: I do not know how I am

supposed to be feeling! This was not part of our curriculum during my theological studies."

Father Dass is a good listener. He is intelligent and wise too. He is not specifically trained in counselling or spiritual direction, but there were some psychology and pastoral counselling courses during his philosophy and theology studies. People come to speak to him. He looks serious and trustworthy. He is a prayerful person. A young lady in her late 20s comes to speak to him. She is a timid person, soft-spoken and sensitive. She was married for about a year. Then she learnt that her young husband was in a relationship with another lady. Therefore, her parents filed a divorce case, and after more than three years, she received her divorce papers. Now she is confused if she did the right thing, if her parents merely forced her, and how she can get her annulment from the Church so that she can move on in her life. She comes to talk to Father Dass from time to time. Her parents are aware of this, and they respect him. Father Dass listens to her with a lot of empathy. After all, he himself has two sisters at home waiting to be married. He feels she is an innocent lady; she did not deserve all this trouble with marriage. He explains to her the church procedures for these cases and supports her in dealing with her confusion and guilt. As the sessions progress, his empathy becomes an attraction. He is drawn toward her. And he thinks, could I abandon my priesthood and marry this young lady who is so innocent. During the sessions, he feels like hugging her to comfort her.

The above cases might seem frightening and negative. Priests who have developed a high level of self-awareness might see traces of themselves in these stories. To a lay person, these stories might come as a shock. Before making any moralistic judgement on Fathers Arun, Kumar, Raj and Dass, I advise that the reader complete reading the entire article.

These stories do not refer to any specific priest in real life. And none of the priests mentioned in the stories above is a bad person. However, none of this is far-fetched. What is the way forward for the four priests?

Taking the perspective of pastoral psychology (Selvam, 2019), this chapter responds to the above cases in two parts. The first part aims to understand the dynamics of these cases in the light of some psychological theories and models. In the second part, I propose Pastoral Supervision as a concrete possibility for handling these situations in such a way that pastoral service may be holistically rendered.

1. Some Psychosocial Mechanisms in the Above Cases

1.1. Euphoria versus Dysphoria in the Neurobiological System

Most of our emotional states and moods are correlated to hormones and neurotransmitters. When someone makes a public appearance, initially, there is some nervousness or stress. This stimulates the activity of adrenaline in the brain. When the individual begins to enjoy the public appearance, there is an activity of dopamine. The individual experiences this as a state of euphoria (see Figure 1).

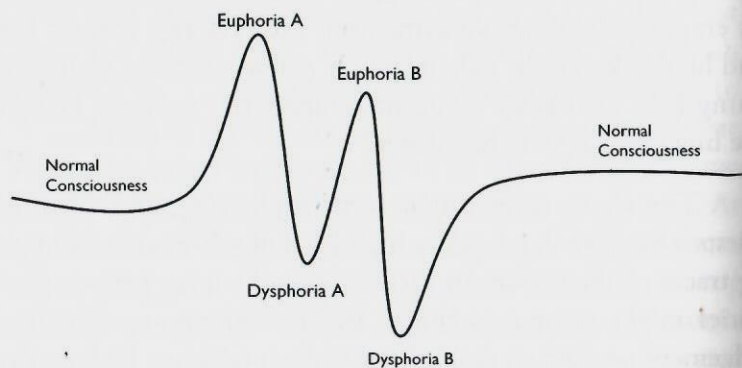


Figure 1. Dynamics of Neurotransmitters

When these neurotransmitters are depleted, the organism slumps into a state of dysphoria (Awad, & Voruganti, 2005). This is a mental state and merely physical fatigue. This is the experience of Fr Arun after celebrating three masses. If he handles this situation in a healthy manner, like going for a walk or reading a book, then his consciousness would return to a normal state. However, if he attempts to excite himself by means of a pleasurable experience, he will again experience a euphoric state (Euphoria B in Figure 1). When the system contracts again, he is likely to experience deeper dysphoria (Dysphoria B in Figure 1). If he does nothing about it, he will eventually return to a state of normal consciousness (Bressan & Crippa, 2005). However, if he attempts to excite himself again, he is likely to become a victim of some form of addiction!

How is Arun going to be educated on this? And how is he being accompanied to handle these situations?

1.2. Interaction of Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviour

In human beings, constantly there is an interaction among the cognitive (what happens in the mind), affective (what happens in the gut/heart) and behavioural (external actions) dimensions. Our thoughts influence our feelings, our feelings influence our behaviour, and our behaviour, in turn, influences our thoughts and feelings (Russ, 2013).

Our thoughts and feelings are influenced by our memories and what we experience through the senses at any given time. Research data has suggested that hearing emotionally embedded words, even if they are not directly related to us, stimulate those part of the brain that are responsible for that emotion (Grandjean et al., 2005). And emotions are generally accompanied by a cognitive-behavioural response to the stimulus (Reisenzein, 2007). Therefore, hearing an angry expression, even if not directed to us, could elicit a cognitive-behavioural response.

This pattern could be even more immediate and explicit when the auditory or visual cues carry sexual contents.

Therefore, Father Kumar, in the cases enumerated at the beginning of the article, does not have to be surprised that he feels low after listening to negative verbal cues the whole day at the confessional. And after listening to the graphic description of sexual behaviour, he himself experiences sexual fantasies and possibly some physical response to them. His concern now should be how best to handle those responses at the cognitive-affective and behavioural levels so that he does not develop any unhealthy, immoral, or addictive behaviour.

1.3. Professional versus Humane Approach in Ministry

One of the dilemmas that priests and people in other helping professions experience is living with the tension between getting emotionally involved with the recipient of the pastoral service and keeping a professional distance from them in such a way that standards are not sacrificed. When those in helping professions emotionally respond to the people they serve, they are likely to experience emotional exhaustion or emotional enmeshment. When the individual pastor or care-giver does not handle these experiences, these states are likely to contribute to burn-out.

On the other hand, not getting emotionally involved would make someone an emotionally-numb person who will be challenged in their emotional intelligence. And they might lack empathy towards those they serve, thus rendering the service cold and even inhumane.

These dynamics are better regulated in some helping professions such as mental health services (Kamp and Dybbroe, 2016), funeral services staff (Cahill, 1999), or general health care (Clarke, 2006). However, in pastoral care, the relationships are more enmeshed. Hence also, the balance between emotions and

professionalism becomes more nuanced. In this context, young priests such as Father Raj, as enumerated among the cases at the beginning, struggle with their intrapersonal processes arising from their daily experiences.

One reason why emotional involvement in pastoral care is not well-regulated is that it is not purely a contractual relationship, but it is covenantal. I discuss the dynamics rising out of this dimension of pastoral care in the next section and relate it to the case of Father Dass.

1.4. Contract versus Covenant in Pastoral Relationships

Father Dass, though a very serious and conscientious person, is not professionally trained in counselling or spiritual direction. Therefore, he relates to the young lady purely on a pastoral relationship. Pastoral relationships tend to be fluid.

One of the reasons why pastoral relationships portray fluidity, as said earlier, is that they are not purely contractual. Richard Gula (1996), a renowned moral theologian, points out that the ethical implication of a relationship will depend on whether it is a contract or a covenant. While in contracts the rights and duties of the parties are clearly stipulated and followed rather legalistically, in a covenant, because of the context of faith, what is considered more important is the relationship and its outcome in terms of growth in faith.

Pastoral relationships often fall in a spectrum that ranges from contractual to covenantal contexts. Contexts such as pastoral counselling and spiritual direction are governed by some code of practice that ensures a contractual tone to the relationship. However, the relationship between the pastor and the members in a prayer group, Bible-study group, or in healing or deliverance ministry could be more unclear.

In short, Father Dass has to be aware that power dynamics get complicated in one-to-one relationships in contexts where the contractual framework is minimised. Furthermore, there are also some psychosocial dynamics in listening to someone who is perceived to be unfairly victimised, as explored in the next section.

1.5. Power versus Vulnerability in Caring Ministry

Engagement in pastoral care entails some power-play. The priest could be in a position of power because of their cultural or ethnic background, gender, educational, economic, and faith advantage. These dynamics create psychological vulnerability and abuse of power.

The danger here can be better elucidated by a popular model of triangulation presented by Karpman (1968, 39-43), which is referred to as the Drama Triangle. Working from the theoretical framework of Transactional Analysis by Eric Berne, Karpman analysed fairy tales and came up with the Drama Triangle (see Figure 2). It describes the archetypal role-swapping dynamics of the Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim that can often be observed between people in a variety of situations. The model has been applied to understand processes involved in conflict resolution, group dynamics, and family therapy.

This model could also be applied in the context of pastoral relationships. Even within the context of a covenant, the pastor often plays the role of a rescuer to the person seeking care who might perceive themselves as a victim. At the emotional level, the victim might have some degree of anger towards the person they perceive as the persecutor who is the cause of their problem, and make themselves vulnerable in front of the pastor who is acting as the rescuer, and take refuge in the rescuer. This offers an additional position of power to the pastor/rescuer.

The power dynamics can be more acute in rural-traditional cultures where respect for age and authority is an important

value. Similarly, in some cultures, power disparity based on gender could also be recognised. In any case, it is the degree of power that determines the level of vulnerability of the care-receiver in the presence of the care-giver.

The level of vulnerability in the relationship might create an opportunity for the rescuer to take advantage of the situation and turn into a persecutor. Therefore, care-givers need to be aware of these dynamics, acknowledge their implicit responses, and ensure boundaries in the relationship. In safeguarding the boundaries of the relationship, the pastoral care-giver provides a safe environment for the wellbeing of the care-receiver. Also, the pastoral care-giver safeguards their own integrity as a person and as a pastor.

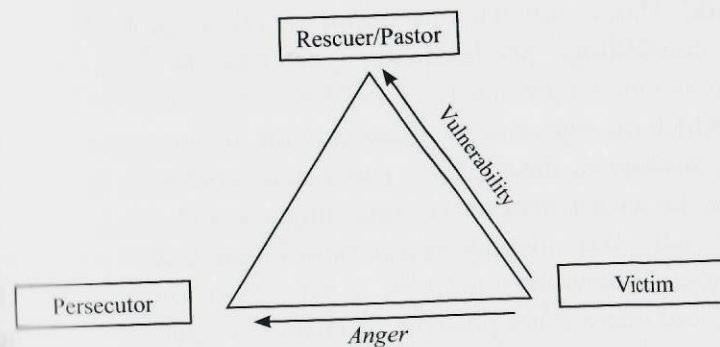


Figure 2. An Adapted Drama Triangle

In the sections above, I have presented the cases and discussed from a psychosocial perspective some theories and concepts that help us understand what could be happening to the cases. What could be a way forward? Besides policy frameworks that might be put in place, we need to create a safe environment where the pastoral practitioner(s) could explore, in the presence of another mature person, how the dynamics of their pastoral engagements affect their identity and other aspects of their self and life. I propose "Pastoral Supervision" as one effective means.

2. Pastoral Supervision

“Pastoral Supervision” offers a support system for individuals in ministry to process their experiences and grow in wisdom and spirituality. Pastoral Supervision is a forum to bring to fore intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics that arise in pastoral contexts in such way that the priests’ psychological, moral, and spiritual wellbeing is taken care of, so that pastoral care is rendered balancing euphoria and dysphoria, professionalism and emotional enmeshment, contractual and covenantal relationships.

More precisely, what is Pastoral Supervision? At face value, the term ‘supervision’ seems to imply a type of ‘over-seeing’ - an expert or a superior accessing your quality of work! This is not what is meant in caring professions such as counselling, psychotherapy, or pastoral care. Pastoral Supervision is a previously agreed upon one-on-one relationship in which the supervisee gives an account of some aspects of his/her ministry to the supervisor in a structured way, elaborating how the involvement in ministry interacts with other aspects of their self – their identity as a person. Figure 3 illustrates where Pastoral Supervision might lie in relation to ministry and the self, and where other possible mechanisms could be used, such as counselling, spiritual accompaniment, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

It is preferable that the supervisor has some background in the type of ministry that the supervisee is involved in but does not have anything directly to do with the context of the ministry of the supervisee. Group supervision could also be a possibility: that is, a supervisor takes a group of people in similar ministry for Supervision in one session. Peer supervision is yet another possibility. Often supervisors have some training in skills relevant to carrying out this level of accompaniment: including listening, discernment, and coaching skills.

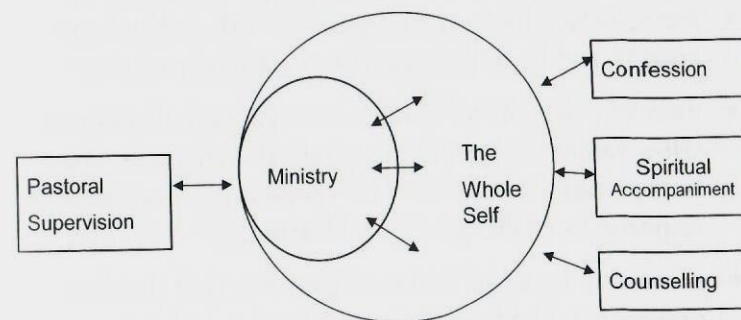


Figure 3. Pastoral Supervision in relation to the Whole Self

To further understand the meaning and the practice of Supervision, an extract from the UK-based Association for Pastoral Supervision and Education (APSE, 2022) is very helpful. The association describes Pastoral Supervision in the following points, which are adapted for our discussion here:

- *a regular, planned intentional and bounded space* in which a practitioner skilled in Supervision (the supervisor) meets with one or more other practitioners (the supervisees) to look together at the supervisees’ practice;
- *a formal relationship* characterised by trust, confidentiality, support and openness that gives the supervisee freedom and safety to explore the issues arising in their work;
- *Spiritually/theologically rich* – works within a framework of spiritual/theological understanding in dialogue with the supervisee’s worldview and work;
- *psychologically informed* – draws on relevant psychological theory and insight to illuminate intra-personal and interpersonal dynamics;
- *contextually sensitive* – pays attention to the particularities of setting, culture and worldview;

- *praxis-based* – focuses on a report of work and/or issues that arise in and from the supervisee's pastoral practice;
- *a way of growing* in vocational identity, pastoral competence, self-awareness, spiritual/theological reflection, pastoral interpretation, quality of presence, accountability, response to challenge, mutual learning;
- *attentive* to issues of fitness to practice, skill development, management of boundaries, professional identity and the impact of the work upon all concerned parties.

It is important to note that Pastoral Supervision is not the same as spiritual accompaniment, counselling, or line management. It focuses on how pastoral practice affects the identity of the pastor. If other relationships such as spiritual accompaniment or counselling are included by virtue of the supervisor being qualified to offer these services, then the dual roles have to be clearly demarked.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered a concrete proposal to mitigate the possible negative impact of the dynamics of euphoria and dysphoria, professionalism and emotional enmeshment, and contractual and covenantal relationships in priestly ministry. To provide opportunities for pastors to avail themselves of this service, theology colleges or seminaries and pastoral offices in dioceses have to invest in training pastoral supervisors.

Secondly, a way of introducing Pastoral Supervision is to invite priests, especially those in the first 5 to 10 years of ordination, to meet monthly in groups under the guidance of a supervisor. The groups have to be small in size, with the same members persevering for two to three years, marked by an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality.

In some religious orders, there is a practice of monthly talk with the superior of the religious community. These occasions can also be restructured to include issues that have been mentioned in this chapter. To be able to carry out the ministry of Pastoral Supervision, the superior will need some introduction to understanding these dynamics and project himself as a mature person to elicit the trust of his priest-confreere.

In this way, we will be able to create a culture where individual priests become more aware, acknowledge and deal with situations of psychosocial dynamics in their ministry.

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03

Becoming a Blessing for Others – Spirituality for Priests Today

Dr. Stanislaus Swamikannu

As priests grow older in age and experience, they realise that ‘they *not only have the power to bless*’ people, but ‘*they are a blessing*’ to them. While both are intimately connected, being a blessing is the source of all blessings that proceed from the person. Being a blessing refers to what a person has become (the gift of receiving a blessing from God), while the act of blessing (the gift of giving a blessing) people is a function or an office that is conferred on priests.

For a priest, ‘to be a blessing’ presupposes that he is first blessed and set apart by a consecration or a special encounter with God. To the extent that a priest feels blessed by God, he becomes a fitting instrument or channel of blessing for people. To the extent a priest experiences blessedness in his life as a priest, he becomes a blessing to others. Being blessed makes a priest or turns a priest into a blessing. And this, in turn, leads him to bless others. This is the miracle and the dynamic mystery of how someone who has been blessed becomes a blessing.

In this short write-up, I shall attempt to explain my convictions regarding what it is ‘to be a blessing to others.’ I