¡Cuidado!
The Church Who Cares and Pastoral Hostility

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Writing from a Latina perspective, Nanko-Fernández draws our attention to “care” as a constitutive component of pastoral ministry. Genuine caring requires ministers to exercise an approach of “pastoral hostility,” ministering daily not only to personal needs, but challenging systemic injustices as well.

The church can regard no one as excluded from its motherly embrace, no one as outside the scope of its motherly care (Paul VI, Ecclesiam Suam, 94).

When asked by my scholarly colleagues to identify my theological method I sometimes half-jokingly reply “pastoral hostility.” While this response draws a nervous chuckle from the academic side of the house, the very same response resonates deeply among the pastoral agents with whom I have shared it. When I mentioned my unique methodological insight at a gathering of Latinos/as involved in professional ministries across the United States, they did not laugh. Rather, they expressed gratitude because this paradoxical expression had somehow managed to articulate what we were experiencing daily in our respective

ministries. My colleagues asked for clarification and immediately appropriated the phrase into Spanish, deciding that hostilidad pastoral was the oxymoron that best suited the reality of our ministries.

While pastoral hostility may appear to be a contradiction in terms, in light of the “signs of our times” and the struggles manifest in the lived experiences of the varied peoples we accompany, it should come as no surprise that our ability to care may at times be compromised by frustration, loss, fear, and even anger. As ministers, how do we care in contexts of unfathomable injustice? How can we be present especially when suffering seems senseless? How do we accompany communities where cycles of poverty, violence, or indifference appear impenetrable? How do we navigate the borders of faith and politics?

The signs of our ecclesial times are equally disturbing. The closings and/or mergings of Catholic parishes and schools raise painful questions about our commitments, especially to our own most vulnerable and poor neighbors. The streamlining of personnel in diocesan and parish ministries and the sagging morale of clergy and religious cannot be easily extricated from the billion dollars plus paid in settlements. As a church and as ministers, how do we survive the current crisis in confidence that years of abuse, coverup, and mismanagement have created? How do we recover financially in order to provide the quality of care our communities deserve? How do we labor with inadequate resources, limited institutional support, and competing needs? As pastoral ministers, how do we go on? As church, why should we care?

The expression “pastoral hostility” can remind us that anger can be stagnating and paralyzing. Anger can stunt creativity, and quite frankly it has not been an emotion that those whose profession calls for compassion are encouraged to express, let alone admit. Yet anger can be constructive as well; it can serve as impetus for necessary change, if, in the words of the poet Martín Espada, this anger is “controlled, directed, creatively channeled, articulated but not all consuming, neither destructive nor self-destructive” (Espada, 41). In the midst of all that aggravates and cries out for redress, how do ministers continue to insure basic levels of care within our communities? How do we care as ministers, as people of faith, without losing ourselves, without forgetting the hope that animates our passion? As church, why must we care? If we neglect this fundamental aspect of our identity and mission, will we risk fostering attitudes of indifference, a collective and exasperated “Whatever! Who cares?”
The Roots of Pastoral Care

Pastoral care can be traced to the earliest days of the nascent communities of post-resurrection Jesus-followers. In his earliest letter, to the Thessalonians, Paul recounts the posture with which the gospel and its ministers encountered their community: “We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us” (1 Thess 2:7-8). Initially a responsibility of the apostles, care for the spiritual and material needs of emerging communities soon required the engagement of others. In the Acts of the Apostles tension between Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking Jewish Jesus-followers is manifest in complaints that Hellenist widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Therefore, the community selects seven members to assume the responsibility of feeding the hungry (Acts 6:1-6). In the Corinthian community expanding needs and the tensions that accompany growth are expressed in terms of a diversity of ministerial roles providing for spiritual, physical, and material care: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues” (1 Cor 12:28).

The community itself was also charged with the responsibility of caring as the first pastoral letter of Peter reminds: “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Pet 4:8-10). Caring extended across communities, as Acts records the sending of relief in time of famine from Antioch, via Barnabas and Saul, to believers in Judea (Acts 11:28-30).

A journey through New Testament texts reveals caring that was contextual, practical, and concerned for the everyday. The earliest disputes betray the tensions associated with contextualized care that sought to address the particularity of communities diversified by religion, language, geography, culture, and social and economic factors. The practical aspects of care were not ignored, as is evident in the gospel accounts of feeding and healing in the ministry of Jesus and in the ministry of the early communities of Jesus’ followers. From the beginning,
they were aware that ministry occurred in the accompaniment of individuals and communities within daily living. Concern for daily life in its ordinariness as well as its struggles comes through in exhortations and encouragement on everything from familial and spousal relations to survival and steadfastness amidst persecution. Retrieving New Testament images invites us to reconsider care as a constitutive component of ministry, with attention to its contextual dimensions, exercised within the course of our daily living.

The Shape of Pastoral Care

Care remains a defining characteristic of pastoral ministry. How care is understood is open to interpretation, and this is reflected in the variety of constructions across Christian denominations. In the Roman Catholic tradition, cura animarum (care of souls) is also intertwined with a sacramental dimension. While current challenges for sacramental ministry are beyond the scope of this article, present reality calls for a shift from models that focus on the minister, usually ordained, as provider of care to ministry as a network of caring professionals and resources. In turn the local faith community becomes a locus of care, not just supplicants in need.

The traditional functions of care are formulated in terms of guiding, sustaining, healing, and reconciling individuals and communities. In recent years, thanks to the influence of feminist, liberationist, and contextual theologies, these functions have been expanded to include nurturing, supporting, and discerning, as well as resisting, empowering, and liberating. African-American pastoral theologians have also reminded us that caring sometimes cannot proceed to liberation when basic survival is at stake.

Caring is Contextual

Like theology, pastoral ministry is local and contextual. Ministry as a process of accompaniment is necessarily contextual as it entails attending to particular individuals and communities, in particular times and circumstances, with particular needs, gifts, challenges, and limitations. Following a June 1998 dialogue on lay ministry with ecclesial counterparts from across the Americas, an advisor for the host U.S. Bishops’ subcommittee observed: “In many ways, ministry is culture-specific” (Lay Ecclesial Ministry). This observation followed conversation “about the class affluence differences of a faith and church brought by conquerors or immigrants, stability or mobility, poverty or middle, valuing of relationships and community or of individualism and independence” (Lay Ecclesial Ministry).
It may seem fairly obvious that differences in social location call for a plurality of pastoral responses. Recognizing the contextuality of care challenges us as ministers and as local church to question assumptions of universality that disguise our particularity. Ghanaian pastoral theologian Emmanuel Larty cautions:

Pastoral care is dependent upon the cultures, reigning philosophies, and psychologies of the periods in which it is practiced. Forms of pastoral care and counseling practiced in Western societies in the twentieth century and now the twenty-first reflect the dominant social, cultural, theological, and psychological theories of the West. There are real differences between theories and practices of effective pastoral care and counseling in different parts of the globe. (Larty, 92)

Such diversity is not only a global matter, but also part of the context of life in the United States. As pastoral care gradually moves from therapeutic paradigms that have only recently acknowledged the great impact of contextual factors to inculturation, strategies are necessary to uncover the hidden presuppositions that guide pastoral responses while allowing local contexts to dictate direction.

In his book Jesus Weeps, pastor and theologian Harold Recinos recommends what he calls pastoral anthropology as a means for providing ecclesial communities with contextual understanding of the dynamics operative within their own experience of local church (Recinos, 115–31). The types of questions he suggests and the level of observation he proposes invite theological reflection and informed practical engagement and raise individual and communal “critical understanding of the social dimensions of systems of oppression that structure human experience each day everywhere” (Recinos, 53). If caring is contextual, then exploration of the relationship of a church to its neighborhood is as necessary as attention to the ordering of the church’s physical space. Which ministries are funded, which community worships in the basement, what languages we use, all say something about our priorities. The accessibility of our common spaces and our worship space sends a message about who is welcome, who can participate, and who can exercise liturgical roles in the assembly. From the connection between ritual life and theological identity to the social structure of parish leadership, all deserve careful heed and local analysis as they reveal not only who...
belongs, but also who is left on the margins. This type of ministerial and communal introspection can lay bare dysfunction and abuse of power and at the same time highlight those efforts that mark a community as faithful to its mission.

Encouraging ministers and communities to reflect on their own particularity as it is expressed in their social and ritual lives, their physical space, and their interpersonal and professional relationships focuses caring on the local context in a given time. This process can serve as a corrective to well-intentioned yet misguided efforts to address diversity in pastoral settings. For example, in some situations the rapid growth in the number of Hispanic Catholics in the U.S. has resulted in a pan-Latinization of particular symbols (e.g., Our Lady of Guadalupe) and experiences. We need to ask ourselves who makes such symbols normative, who are the evangelizers? Are these the things our peoples really think about, or are they made normative because we as theologians and ministers choose to promote them? Do our attempts at sensitivity impose a monolithic culture on a presence whose diversity defies simple categorization by race, class, nationality, language, and expression of popular religion?

Caring in lo cotidiano

If pastoral care is contextual, then daily living emerges as a privileged source of theological reflection and the locus of our ministerial praxis. In the words of mujerista theologian Ada-Maria Isasi-Díaz, “lo cotidiano [the daily] makes social location explicit for it is the context of the person in relation to physical space, ethnic space, social space” (Isasi-Díaz, 71). Daily living cannot be simply reduced to the private or domestic sphere. As Orlando Espín points out, “It might be argued that the so-called macro or public sphere only influences people’s lives if, when, and to the degree that it existentially affects them at the daily or micro level. It may be conversely argued that there is ultimately no real-life substance or consistency to the macro sphere. Real life exists in the concrete, the local, the familial and communal, the micro” (Espin, 126).

Refocusing pastoral ministry on la vida cotidiana (daily living) counters the temptation to construct the function of care narrowly. The daily aspect of ministry challenges tendencies to view care and counseling primarily in terms of intervention in times of crisis. Care entails dealing with the ordinary: the tedious and the crisis, the struggles and the joys, moments of passage and the mundane. Sometimes it requires extensive pastoral planning and other times the only appropriate response is to accept that there is nothing one can do or say except be present.

Engaging in the messiness of daily living empowers ministers and communities to seek the transformation of injustice in the public arena as well as in the domestic. The daily spotlights the ravages of poverty, the destruction of addictions,
the paralysis of abuse, and the toll of racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. In the daily one comprehends the public role of pastoral ministry as hospital and nursing home visitations raise questions about the affordability of health care and the complexity of biomedical issues, and as the wages of war come home when local churches bury military personnel who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the daily living of our ministries we learn humbling and painful lessons: justice takes time; we cannot heal or save, reconcile or liberate everyone, but we are obligated to care. María Pilar Aquino provides perspective:

Theologically, daily life has salvific value because the people themselves, in lo cotidiano of their existence, let us experience the salvific presence of God here and now in their daily struggles for humanization, for a better quality of life, and for greater social justice. At the same time, daily life urges us to join actively in the long march toward a new humanity and a future of fulfillment still latent in the heart of creation, until we reach God’s definitive salvation. (Aquino, 39)

The “long march toward a new humanity” begins in the very practical steps taken in la vida cotidiana. John Paul II observed, “What are needed are everyday gestures, done with simplicity and constancy, that are capable of producing an authentic change in interpersonal relationships” (World Day, 2002, 1). The latest waves of immigration to the U.S. illustrate the need for care that is contextual and immersed in the daily. The complexities of immigration can obscure the reality that national policies impact the daily living of actual, situated human beings, our neighbors and our parishioners. Focus on the magnitude of migration conceals the reality that “the work of welcome is practical but not easy” (DiMarzio, 29). Addressing migration as church requires an appreciation for theology as local (Ruiz, 2004, 2–18) and welcome as practical, intentional and daily. In the words of Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, “If you think we can avoid that type of street-to-street work and still serve the newcomers, you’re wrong. We need to use personal contact to overcome resistance at times and we need to reach out to people who are sometimes very isolated and often frightened and suspicious” (DiMarzio, 29).

On the other hand, engaging migration on a daily basis reminds us that for the church, the local is also global. Our documented and undocumented parishioners, “on account of the peculiarly universal nature of the church, are not outsiders” (Pontifical Commission, 12). An earthquake in El Salvador influences the archdiocese of Washington, civil unrest in Haiti affects the archdiocese of Miami, the “church of departure” and the “church of arrival” are bound to each other and obligated to “keep up their own pastoral responsibility in light of a lively and practically-expressed feeling of reciprocity” (Pontifical Commission, 10). As a continent, at the national level of episcopal conferences, we are con-
nected; on the local level, church-to-church, we still remain strangers to each other.

En conjunto

As a response to the signs of the times, pastoral hostility/hostilidad pastoral discloses the prophetic dimension of care. It harkens back to the images of the Old Testament prophets, whose righteous rage was fueled by a hope that what is unjust must no longer be and will not be in God’s own time. Prophets see what is and cajole communities to be what they should be because prophets are grounded in their communities and are invested in their care. But even the prophetic minister needs to be aware of the temptation to lose sight of the people whom we accompany in their struggles.

Even with the best of intentions we too can participate or collude in the process of silencing those we sought to uphold, ignoring the dignity we share. For example: A tour of an Immigration and Naturalization Service detention camp on the El Paso/Juarez border made its way through the medical clinic. The “tourists” were theologians, their guide a hardworking chaplain, the current attraction an examining room with a gregarious and dedicated medical professional. In plain sight sat a young man on an examining table with a thermometer in his mouth, invisible and voiceless. He appeared to be no more than a teenager, nameless even to those who were most committed to justice at the borders. The conversation swirled in English around a patient whose violated privacy went unnoticed; finally a sheepish introduction was initiated and the long overdue question asked: Lo siento, me llamo.... ¿Como se llama Ud.? (I’m sorry; my name is... What’s your name?)

Ministry as a process of accompaniment in la vida cotidiana of particular contexts is not a solo process: it is mutual. As a U.S. Hispanic theologian and pastoral minister, my praxis—which includes my teaching and scholarship—is influenced by the necessary interrelationship between teologia en conjunto and pastoral en conjunto. The premise is that theology and pastoral activity are communal endeavors that require mutual engagement and accountability. Such a posture values experience as a locus theologicus and builds upon critical, reflective interaction between the practical and the theoretical, an integration of the
scholarly with the grassroots. Engagement that is done en conjunto, that is, together, within community, recognizes the need to cross borders while respecting the integrity of boundaries. Fruitful relationships grow in contexts of gracious hospitality that appreciate that when we are in each others’ company we are on sacred ground.

From the perspective of en conjunto, pastoral theology emerges as the primordial contextual theology whose analysis cannot be divorced from daily lived experience or from conscientious involvement in pastoral practice. This reciprocity “keeps the practice of theology from becoming a self-enclosed, self-preoccupied endeavor by binding its questions and reflections to the lived reality and the living faith of the churches and communities within which and for the sake of which it takes place” (Ruiz, 1996).

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