"Boundaries" is a new term for those who do ministry in the church, but it is a reality that has always existed. Whether one thinks of Robert Frost's admonition that “good fences make good neighbors,” or Jesus’ warning to Mary Magdalene, “Do not hold on to me” (John 20:17), setting boundaries has served as an important function in life and ministry.

Boundaries are the limits that allow for safe and healthy connections with others. They mark the place where one person's reality ends and another person's reality begins. Boundaries are necessary and helpful not only in one's personal life but also in one's professional life. Respecting boundaries has become increasingly important in the professional life of ministers in the Catholic Church in the last ten to fifteen years as we have become aware of egregious violations of the sexual boundaries of pre-pubescent and pubescent children by priests, deacons, and lay ministers. Thus an old truth has taken on a more prominent importance because it has not been honored, especially with the more vulnerable members of our Catholic community.

In this essay we will begin by exploring additional reasons why the value of boundaries has become important in today's Church. Then, we will discuss the various components of personal boundaries and the critical importance of ministers knowing their personal boundaries. Finally, we will delineate the kinds of professional boundaries that need to be honored with the various constituencies of people in the Church today.

Why Are Boundaries an Issue Today?

The issue of professional boundaries is an important issue in all professions—legal, psychological, medical, business, and ministerial. Each of these professions has had to come to grips with what individuals can and cannot do as they relate to people who come to them for service, as well as to peers, supervisors, and those with whom they might be in a supervisory relationship. Certain ethical and cultural issues have surfaced recently to make it a more important issue.

First, an underlying theme in professional relationships is accountability. Professionally trained adults are accountable for their actions. It is equally true for clergy and ministers in the Church. Clergy and ministers make a public commitment to care for others, which clearly implies that

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they can be trusted. That trust means that individuals who go to them for help do not have to worry about their personal, psychological, spiritual, physical, or sexual safety when they are with them.

A second underlying theme is power. When individuals are in a position of public trust, such as clergy, they are in a position of power. Some clergy and ministers struggle with that notion because they see it as antithetical to the Gospel. Power is not being used as a theological term here, but as a psychological one. The opinion, judgments, suggestions, and ideas of clergy and ministers have more influence and strength than those of the people seeking support and help from them. The training and experience of professional ministers puts those ministers in a “one-up” position; in other words, clergy and ministers in the Church are not peers of those to whom they minister. Regardless of one’s theology of power, the professional and legal reality of power is that it puts the professional minister in a position of greater responsibility to care for the other and not to use the other for their own gratification or need.

A third underlying theme is the changing cultural climate. In particular, two factors in our culture have surfaced the issue of boundaries. The first of these factors has been the sexual abuse by priests, deacons, and lay ministers that has been publicized in the last fifteen or more years. Sadly, such sexual abuse has gone on before in the life of the Church, but the knowledge of it has not been in the public domain to the extent that it has recently. In any pastoral setting, clergy and professional ministers have a position of power, and survivors of abuse by them describe situations in which they have felt victimized by the enormous influence and power exercised by priests and others in their lives, telling them such lies as “this will be good for you.”

The second cultural factor has been feminism. The sense of empowerment that women have experienced, particularly in western culture, in the last half of the twentieth century has changed dramatically how women respond to men in public and in private. Such a factor has been true in the Church and in many other institutions. One of the results of that has been that women are bringing forth charges of sexual harassment in a way that would have been unthinkable even thirty years ago.

Thus, accountability, power, the clergy sexual abuse scandal, and the rise of feminism have helped to make boundaries a critically important issue in ministry in today’s Church. Knowledge of one’s personal and professional boundaries becomes a necessary part of the responsible exercise of ministry.

**Personal Boundaries**

Before clergy and professional ministers can respect the boundaries of others, they must know their own boundaries. Boundaries are positive ways to engage with and care for other people. They are the limits that allow for safe and healthy connections with others. They help individuals to define and know themselves.

Knowing ourselves means knowing our inner life. That inner life is comprised of wants, beliefs, feelings, experiences, needs, sexual attractions, decisions, unconscious experiences, dreams, and fantasies. It is unique to each individual. Knowing boundaries means respecting that uniqueness and the fact that it is separate from, though possibly similar to, another’s inner life. Healthy boundaries respect those differences as a way to connect with another’s experience. On the other hand, unhealthy boundaries occur when that difference is blurred, and individuals find it difficult to determine where their reality ends and the reality of another begins.
Boundaries can differ from person to person. Types of boundaries are influenced by factors like gender, ethnicity, family background, and different life experiences such as physical and/or sexual abuse. The fact that one is male or female certainly impacts what boundaries they have, especially, as they relate to same-sex and opposite-sex people. If one is Italian-American, Irish-American, Indonesian, or Honduran, that background will have an influence on how one expresses or accepts affection from others. If one's family expressed anger physically, or with words, or by withdrawing, that style will have a great impact on how comfortable one is expressing one's anger with others.

Boundaries can be physical, emotional, and spiritual. Physical boundaries include a whole myriad of physical expressions such as closeness to another person, touch, eye contact, clothing, money, gifts, food, noise and smoke pollution, and time and energy. The extent to which people feel comfortable being near or close to another person, how they touch others or others touch them, whether there is direct eye contact or not—all these are boundaries that they as individuals need to set for themselves. Indeed, each person has a right and responsibility in each of these areas. They have a right to determine who touches them and how they touch them. They have a responsibility to tell others what is acceptable for them and what is not.

Mental or emotional boundaries are equally important. These boundaries include thoughts, feelings, confidences, needs, sexual attractions, and choices. Every person has a right to their feelings, to express them in non-abusive ways, as well as not to express feelings. Certainly, in light of the sexual abuse problem in the church today, it is very important for ministers to know their sexual attractions. The right to have sexual attractions is as important as the responsibility ministers have for the sexual attractions. Clergy and professional ministers have the responsibility to manage those attractions, given their public commitment as well as their moral commitment. What ministers share and how they share their emotional boundaries is the responsibility of each person.

Finally, spiritual boundaries also carry rights and responsibilities. Individuals have the right to their religious experiences, their relationship with God, and to the spiritual path and practices they have taken and grown in. They have the responsibility to determine with whom they share their spiritual life. Talking about such experiences with a spiritual director or good friend may be quite different than talking about them with parishioners.

Using the term “power” in another sense than described above, people have power over whom they let in to their inner life, and whom they do not. The exercise of that power may vary depending on the other person, and the circumstances that might exist in a given situation. Physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries may also change, given the various roles people have. If a parishioner becomes a Director of Religious Education in a parish, boundaries with fellow parishioners may need to shift.

Boundaries help us to define and know ourselves. To the extent that priests and ministers know their inner life—their physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries—to that extent they will not have difficulty with professional, ministerial boundaries. The opposite is equally true. To the extent that they do not know their own boundaries, to that extent they will have difficulty with boundaries in ministerial settings.

Ministerial Boundaries

With whom do ministerial or professional boundaries need to exist? The list can be endless. It includes parishioners, course-
lees, spiritual directees, students, youth, parish committee members, volunteers, support staff, housekeepers, and other employees. It includes any individuals with whom the priest and minister is in a position of power.

What behaviors need to be questioned? Again, the range is broad. It includes hugging, wrestling with children, tickling or other playful behaviors with children, and massaging. Behaviors exist also around the receiving and giving of gifts, the use of titles like Father or Sister or Reverend or Brother, and the appropriateness of how the minister is dressed in particular situations. The list is endless. The basic questions include what may be appropriate in a situation, and what is comfortable for the person receiving ministerial care. It is not the minister’s comfort but that of the person receiving care, which is important.

Ministry today is quite complicated. Based on the experience of behavioral problems of ministers and priests, it is clear that there are certain characteristics that make ministry more susceptible to boundary violations. The overriding characteristic is the vulnerability of people who come for help from priests and ministers. People in ministry are often dealing with people who are in emotional crises like terminal illness, divorce, death, or job loss. By the very nature of the work, priests and ministers are privy to intimate details of a person’s life, gaining easy access to the pain and difficulty the person is experiencing. Other factors like having a private office, a flexible schedule, and the personal characteristics of warmth, sensitivity, and good listening skills put priests and ministers at greater risk for boundary violations, especially if those coming for help are particularly vulnerable.

What are some guidelines for establishing healthy boundaries in ministry? First, the priest and minister have the responsibility for setting the boundaries in a situation. No matter whether there are factors such as the age or experience of the other person being similar to that of the minister, it is the minister who is in the position of power in a ministerial setting, and must determine the appropriate boundaries.

Second, priests and ministers are responsible for setting their own personal boundaries and respecting the boundaries of the persons for whom they are caring. Boundaries are needed for both the givers and receivers of care, for some situations occur where the receivers of care do not know how to set their own boundaries because of negative experiences in their past. They might invite or ask for inappropriate physical contact. The ministers must know their own boundaries and help the receiver to set their own. Moreover, erring on the side of caution is particularly important when a priest or minister is uncertain of what is appropriate. This conservative approach is particularly important if the receivers of care seem hesitant. It is the receivers’ level of discomfort that is the criterion for setting the boundary.

Setting boundaries is a challenging part of ministry today. Circumstances of time, the setting, and the minister’s role as well as the need of the person receiving ministerial care impact the choice of boundaries. What can priests and ministers do to help themselves in an ongoing way?

First, they can continue to grow in the understanding of their inner life—their own physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries. Some of these boundaries will change because of age, pastoral position, and various life circumstances. It is particularly important for them to be aware of times when they may be more at risk for boundary violations. Priests and ministers have their own life crises such as illness, depression, or unsatisfying pastoral assignments. In those circumstances they
may have greater need for affection, and might look for that need to be fulfilled by a friendly parishioner or understanding staff member. While those needs might be legitimate, looking to parishioners or staff to meet them is not.

Furthermore, clergy who are isolated from their peers are often at risk for crossing boundaries. In those circumstances, for example, feelings of loneliness, anger, fear, and frustration are more powerful. The feelings need to be expressed, but doing that with students or staff is crossing a boundary by assuming these people are peers. They are not peers.

Finally, ministers who do not have someone to whom they talk about professional and personal issues can also put themselves at risk. Using a spiritual director, a therapist, a mentor, or a supervisor to talk about the pastoral and emotional challenges of ministry today is critically important. If that kind of structure is not in their lives, ministers risk using their parishioners in an exploitative way, regardless of their intentions not to use them thus.

Ongoing growth in self-knowledge by ministers, and knowing how to appropriately care for themselves are critical to effective and respectful ministry today. Regular rest, relaxation, solitude, exercise, and prayer are important boundaries for priests and ministers today. Setting those boundaries will help them to continue to set appropriate boundaries with the people who come to them for care, compassion, and counsel. Those values are reflected in the model minister: Jesus Christ.

References


