

PASTORAL PRACTICE AND DOCTRINE— Two Instances of Change and Some Questions They Raise

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THIS BRIEF PAPER is not intended to be an exhaustive study, but rather to surface two instances where there are observable bifurcations between the inherited doctrinal stance of the Church and its contemporary pastoral practice. In each case I offer a description of the issue, and some exploratory questions that in my view are pertinent to the broader questions of consistency, doctrine, and practice often raised in relation of same-sex blessings or marriages.

1. Suicide

The work of Wilma Woods, a senior year student at the College of Emmanuel and St Chad, toward a final year integration project recently drew my attention again to suicide as an issue where there is a recent history of change in pastoral practice (certainly among most Anglicans and across many denominations). It is important here to differentiate between the Church's general handling of the question of suicide, and more recent discussions about assisted suicide or forms of personally undertaken euthanasia. The latter is a much more complex question of ethics.

The article available on the web at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,892856,00.html> from the November 2, 1959 issue of *Time* magazine, and reprinted below would mark a popular documentation of the shift in pastoral practice in Anglican circles, and the concomitant shifting in terms of doctrinal consideration.

Article from *Time* magazine, 2 November, 1959.

Once a schoolmaster, the Archbishop of Canterbury relentlessly assigns papers to his church—and on subjects fit to make a county curate spill his tea. In recent years the Anglican Church has issued opinions on artificial insemination, birth control, homosexuality and prostitution. Out last week was the latest: Ought Suicide to be a Crime?

The 56-page pamphlet is the work of a five-man committee appointed by the Archbishop in March 1958 under the chairmanship of J. T. (for John Traill) Christie, principal of Oxford's Jesus College. The committee members (a lawyer, a psychiatrist, a philosopher and a theologian) investigated the subject of self-destruction from almost every conceivable angle—historical, legal, medical, moral—and came to the conclusion that considerably more charity is needed all around.

“Most Fatal Sin.” Suicide was not always frowned on; in eight instances in the Bible*suicide is not mentioned in condemnation, and the ancients in the Hellenic times tended to look upon the power to take one's

own life as an inalienable privilege. But St. Thomas Aquinas summed up the reason for the Roman Catholic Church's severity toward suicide when he wrote: "[It] is the most fatal of sins, because it cannot be repented of." Protestantism was even harder on suicides than Catholicism.

State backed up church with its own sanctions. In England until 1823 a suicide's body was buried at a crossroads with a stake through the heart; until 1882 it was buried at night. All the property of a suicide was confiscated until 1870. Today in England, suicide is still considered at law a felony (both in England and the U.S. an attempted suicide is a misdemeanor).

This legal attitude, says the Anglican committee, is plainly wrong, and "public opinion has outstripped the law. With regard to attempted suicide, the law is not uniformly enforced, and it ought to be repealed or amended." The committee recommends that in addition to abolishing the felony of suicide, a new offense should be written into law "of aiding, abetting or instigating the suicide of another."

Running Away. For those who commit suicide, the committee recommends a special burial service. Those who are tempted or fail in an attempt should "be specially commended to the pastoral concern of the clergy," and the clergy should be "offered more help in understanding this part of their pastoral duty."

Explaining the report on the BBC last week, Committee Chairman Christie summed up: "If any member of the committee were asked if he considered suicide wrong he would say it was. Of course there are always exceptions. But in general, Christians—who are a minority in this country at present—would say no man or woman had the right to terminate life entrusted to him by God. There is also a feeling that to take one's own life when things are difficult is rather like running away in battle. On the other hand psychologists have made us more tolerant than we used to be ... To punish by fine or imprisonment someone who found life intolerable and tried to end it is ridiculous."

*Judges 9:54 (Abimelech), Judges 16:30 (Samson), Samuel 31:4-5 (Saul and his armor bearer), Samuel 17:23 (Ahithophel), I Kings 16:18 (Zimri), Maccabees 14:41 (Razis), Matthew 27:5 (Judas), Acts 16:27 (the jailer).

Some observations and questions:

- 1) The shift in pastoral practice took place in part because of new perceptions about human psychology and mental health. By and large the act of taking one's own life came to be viewed as something that was done when an individual was "not in sound mind." [Here we have a clear instance of how new insights of science, etc affect pastoral practice and interact in the process of doctrinal and pastoral change.]
- 2) Insofar as the biblical material is concerned, it is much more ambiguous than the much stronger position taken for many centuries by Christians—in fact the discussion in Judaism, as far as I have encountered it, is much more aware of this ambiguity, despite its general very strong foundational "pro-life" affirmation. Some thirty years ago a lecture by a leading Jewish rabbi and philosopher sponsored by Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Toronto indicated that the question of suicide was raised and commented on in rabbinic *responsa* during the pre-WWII period in the eastern European ghettos and also among the more general holocaust *responsa*. [This offers an instance of how a particular dominant reading of the scriptural tradition has shaped a doctrinal tradition, where the witness of the scriptures is much more ambiguous.]
- 3) At the same time, the "not of sound mind" approach to suicide provided a way of bridging/finessing/blurring pastoral matters with family and community—it provided a way to frame moral questions and ultimate ques-

tions about the fate of the loved one. [Here we see how a particular pastoral need requires of the Church that it find new ways to frame theological discussion.]

- 4) On the contrary, we might argue that the basic pastoral issue posed by suicide is not that of the individual who has killed him/herself, but the impact on family, friends, community etc.—residual guilt etc. In fact, from an anthropological perspective it could be argued that the former ritual/burial practice more effectively addresses these issues—since by implication they make clear that responsibility for what has happened rests **not** with the community (who should not therefore legitimately bear and feel guilt) but with the individual concerned (whose choice to reject human community etc. is now visibly represented in permanence, which representation also gives permission to the community to feel and process the anger, hurt etc caused.) [Here this offers an instance of how the pastoral practice of the Church relates to broader sociological/anthropological needs and processes.]
- 5) In terms of how it understood and offered pastoral care in relation to suicide, the changes in the Church were not running ahead of society in this shift in practice and teaching. [This is thus also an instance for exploring the relationship between societal change and the doctrinal/pastoral change that will probably of necessity follow.]

2. Baptism of Children Born out of Marriage

This issue was drawn to my attention in a public presentation at a recent diocesan synod and also in subsequent conversation with a bishop from the diocese concerned. This issue of pastoral practice is also noted in the House of Bishops Statement of May 2007, in their observation early in the statement that “We certainly hope no child is denied baptism solely on the basis of the sexual orientation, or the marital status, of the parents. It is inconsistent and unacceptable to deny baptism to children as a way of imposing discipline on the sexual behaviour of the parents.” I should note that the bishop in question was arguing for the position taken by the House of Bishops in relation to what had been historical practice in some parishes in the diocese.

As the synod presentation made clear it is still the practice in some parts of the Canadian Church not to baptize children who are born to parents who are not married. I am aware of clergy who have encountered in their ministry individuals who have been alienated from the church for long periods of time because of such refusals within living memory. This offers an interesting reflection point, since this instance is one where pastoral practice is in outright contradiction of doctrine, and also of the historical teaching of the Anglican Church in *The Book of Common Prayer* 1662 which states:

For every child to be baptized there shall be not fewer than three godparents, of whom at least two shall be of the same sex as the child and of whom at least one shall be of the opposite sex; save that, when three cannot be conveniently had, one godfather and one godmother shall suffice. Parents may be godparents for their own children provided that the child shall have at least one other godparent. The godparents shall be persons who have been baptized and confirmed and will faithfully fulfil their responsibilities both by their care for the child committed to their charge and by the example of their own godly living. Nevertheless the Minister shall have power to dispense with the requirement of confirmation in any case in which in his judgement need so requires.

The Minister shall instruct the parents or guardians of an infant to be admitted to Holy Baptism that the same responsibilities rest on them as are in the service of Holy Baptism required of the godparents.

No Minister shall refuse or, save for the purpose of preparing or instructing the parents or guardians or godparents, delay to baptize any infant within his cure that is brought to the church to be baptized, provided

that due notice has been given and the provisions relating to godparents are observed. If the Minister shall refuse or unduly delay to baptize any such infant, the parents or guardians may apply to the Bishop of the diocese who shall, after consultation with the Minister, give such directions as he thinks fit.

Note the final paragraph here—the only legitimate obstacle to the baptism of any infant is the lack of at least two godparents. The stipulation that parents have the right to recourse to the Bishop for refusal of baptism makes this even clearer.

Some observations and questions:

- 1) As noted this is an example where historical pastoral and liturgical practice in some dioceses and communities outright contradicts doctrine. [Some would argue that pastoral practice must follow from established doctrine, but this is an obvious case where the question emerges about whether pastoral practice and doctrine are bound together at all, or whether local custom and convention can simply override the doctrine of the church even in matters as significant as the dominical sacrament of baptism. If the clear positive teaching of the Church with regard to a sacrament such as baptism can be, and has been over a long time, set aside then why is the church's teaching about marriage or same-sex relationships any different?]
- 2) The pastoral practice of refusing baptism to children born out of wedlock clearly has to do with sociological and anthropological needs within the community. Here the pastoral practice is functioning as “admission” not primarily to the Body of Christ, but as a mechanism for making public statements about who or who is not part of the social community, who or who is not “morally acceptable” to the church. [This thus offers an instance of the relation between socio-anthropological needs and practice and the liturgies and praxis of the church. If the church's historic practice in some communities is shaped by social and anthropological considerations, in outright contradiction of established doctrine, why can it not be shaped by the social and anthropological needs of other communities even if it also may contradict traditional teaching?]
- 3) If it is acceptable pastoral practice to refuse a sacrament to one individual contrary to doctrine merely to provide support for an accepted local set of social mores, why is it any less acceptable to use a sacrament [such as marriage] to provide support for another set of social mores? And if pastoral practice has more generally changed with the change in social mores in the case of baptism of such infants, why could the pastoral practice with regard to marriage not be equally open to change in the light of changed social mores in reference to marriage. [If pastoral practice and doctrine can be unlinked in one instance, why can they not in another instance?]