

# **When God's Good Gifts are Defiled: Pastoral Care for the Sinner and The Sinned Against**

Presented by:

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I'm delighted and admittedly somewhat unnerved to be with you this morning. When one of my colleagues learned that a mere Christian psychologist was going to speak at a Lutheran seminary campus on the topic of sin and sexuality, he elevated his eyebrows and said, "Freudian death wish, huh?" He wanted to know if I was to be regarded as an expert in the area of sin or sex. Great choices. Trust me when I tell you that "Sexual Sin Expert" is not going to look good on my letterhead.

I'm not a Ph. Deity like Dr. Phil, but I am eager to offer for your consideration what it is that my clients have taught me in the last several decades. I warned the conference coordinators that I am not a philosopher or a theologian. Yet, when they mentioned that I could speak with you about the impact of sin – then, I was easily persuaded, for my life is steeped in sin. Lest anyone misunderstand: my professional vocation is steeped in the sin of *other* people.

Every person I've counseled in the last couple of decades has been a sinner, or was sinned against. A goodly number managed to suffer both misfortunes. These Christian souls have taught me that sexual defilement is no mere, niggling annoyance. I have watched as defilement has sucked the life, hope, trust and faith from many of its victims. Defilement leaves in its wake only the debris of Satan's mischief and merry making. I've become deeply aware of the devastation of sexual defilement in the last years as I've seen the personal and spiritual wreckage of my clients' lives scattered about me. Some, from the bumper sticker school of theology might say, "Lighten, up. Sin happens." I've come to believe that we can no longer sit back, and wag our heads sadly when it comes to the well-being of God's baptized children who remain captive to wounds of sin, particularly those who have been sinned against.

I have a clear bias as I speak with you this morning. I'm particularly passionate about serving the sinned against soul. The soul defiled by the sin of another; the soul that did not choose to sin. The soul that has marinated in the pain inflicted by another; often inflicted by another whom one has loved.

This morning we will confirm our culture's wild indifference to God's vision for sexuality. I'll offer you a clear characterization of what it means to be a soul who is sinned against. Then, I'll profile the particular spiritual hazards that exist for those of us who would endeavor to respond to the puzzle pieces of defilement, whether we are called

and ordained servants, psychotherapists, or family members. Finally, I'll point to what I believe are compassionate and merciful responses essential for help, healing and renewal of the sinned against.

### **Cultural Realities**

Our culture is a decision-making, happening kind of place where the winners are those who seek and find satisfaction on their own terms. Our culture has rules for determining just who are the winners and losers and how the game of life shall be played. (Our God also has rules, but these days, the culture seems markedly less interested in those.) What of the vision of Christian marriage and Christian sexuality? What of the legacy given us by our fathers and forefathers? Our culture's vision of God's Word and will regarding Christian sexuality has become a twisted, narcissistic nightmare. This week, many speakers have set the cultural scene with clarity. In brief We live in a world where moral atrocities multiply faster than bunnies in a box. Many regard Christian morality as an embarrassment. We worship autonomy, control, personal entitlements and power. The only real sins that cause alarm in the public square are homophobia and wearing animal fur. We delight in our aberrations and our excesses and unabashedly enjoy living prodigal lives before our God.

A brief statistical romp through polls reveals the full palate of sexual sin

80% of individuals between ages 12 and 20 approved of premarital sex in 2003. In the 1950s only 12% approved.

84% of single women with a college education agreed that, "it is common these days for people my age to have sex just for fun and not expect any commitment beyond the encounter itself."

In 2003, 34.6 percent of babies were born to unmarried women, with the average age of unwed mothers increasing with each passing year

A whopping 88% of teens who take abstinence pledges have sexual intercourse before marriage. – although pledged teens tend to wait about 18 months longer than their peers before becoming sexually active

41% of 15 year olds have hooked up; 14% of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders have already begun to engage in casual sexual interactions routinely.

26 licensed brothels exist in the state of Nevada, one owned and operated by Hollywood Madam Heidi Fleiss is the first legal brothel serving female customers.

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that we have really adopted Nike's ad slogan as our own cultural mantra for sexual behavior: "Just do it." Our culture has come to believe that purity is about organic foods, vegetarian health spas and in-room herbal detox baths. We have lost our sense of the holy, we have, indeed lost our way.

Dominoes of defilement are falling in all directions throughout our culture. Worse, the souls in the midst of the fray are not the least bit alarmed. We're told no one is being hurt. We're assured that sexual repression is just so last century. Everywhere we look, God's holy design for sexuality is being splattered like a bug on a windshield. Something precious, something never fully comprehended is being squandered and lives are being defiled. And people are being sinned against. The examples are legion; I'll offer a few:

Loving Christian parents are heart broken as they learn that their young adult son or daughter prefers an alternative life style. Parents are overwrought. They fear they've failed their children. They grieve their child's loss of a spiritual compass. They wonder if their child will also choose to disavow his or her practice of the faith.. Parents suffer silently what is really fourth commandment abuse wrapped in sixth commandment catastrophes.

What of the nomadic hoardes of recreational sex offenders? Chaste Christian men and women may one day be wed to these sexually irresponsible youth. Their marriage beds have been defiled without their consent, often without their knowledge and they have been sinned against, as well.

Lest we imagine that defilement exists only among the single, let me be swift to acknowledge that on a routine basis marriages are betrayed, holy vows are abandoned, God's vision for Christian marriage is shattered in reckless exhibits of extra-marital hormonal excesses, abandonment, abuse, pornography addiction and countless marriages are simply dissolved when they become inconvenient.

### **The Gifts of Mercy and Grace**

For centuries, the Christian church has been galvanized to bring the saving truth of Jesus Christ to those who have sinned against God and to those who have sinned against their neighbor so that sinners might revel in forgiveness. One pastor told me, "that's what we do in the church, our job is to forgive sinners." And we should. And we do. Have you sinned?

Boy have we got the faith for you. Have we got the God for you: God, the Holy Trinity, to be exact. God the Father, Creator. God the Son, Redeemer, God the Spirit, Sanctifier. That's the God you need if you have sinned.

Been unfaithful? Our God can forgive that. Euthanized your marriage during a tough stretch of life? God can forgive that, too. God can, does and has always promised to forgive the sins of His repentant children. He draws us forever back to Himself, drowning the Old Adam in the very real power of baptismal grace and burying our sins in Christ's own tomb where they will remain for all eternity.

Easter morning has forever come to be celebrated by sinners throughout all Christendom. It is the sinners' grand festival of awe and thanksgiving. For in the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, our God masterfully, conquered sin and death for all time and won

the forgiveness of sins, giving life and salvation for all who believe in Him. Satan is done in -- a forever condemned angelic/megalomaniac loser. All in a day's work and sacrifice for the Omnipotent God of the Universe.

By the grace of God, repentant sinners find rescue, remedy, and comfort and are invited to take possession of Life giving eternal promises offered them by God Himself. Sinners need not live in the squalor of their fear and misery. Sinners need not suffer silently. Sinners need not find their own way out of their pain, anger and helplessness.

*That* particular curse seems to be reserved for another group of people. A group of people whom I will call "the sinned against." The sinned against often seem to live on a scruffy parcel of emotional and spiritual landscape that is often undetected or neglected by the church. To twist a time honored bit of wisdom: all the king's horses and all the king's men don't always notice the sinned against kin. (You won't find that in your NT concordance or in Luther.) Some theologians have suggested that we may not really have noticed the plight of the sinned against much at all.

### **The Sinned Against**

More pointedly, some have come to believe that theologians and parish pastors alike may have abdicated their role in ministering to the victims of sin. A prominent voice speaking on this matter is Andrew Park, a professor of Theology at United Theological Seminary in Ohio and an ordained United Methodist minister. His 2004 text entitled, *From Hurt to Healing: The Theology of the Wounded*, examines what he calls woundedness that exists on the "other side of sin." Park writes, "For the past two thousand years, we have inadequately treated the victims of sin by neglecting to formulate doctrines for them. It is time for the church to think about a salvific path for the sinned-against. To do so, we need to understand the pain of the wounded, listening to their agonies." Park concludes that, "we have taught a brilliantly insightful, decidedly orthodox understanding of original sin. We are resigned to the perpetual presence of the ghastly twins born of original sin: evil and suffering."

An unexpected outcome of Lutheran theology is that we are accustomed to explaining evil eloquently and theologically. We are less accustomed to responding to evil inflicted on another soul. In fact, Park claims, "traditional Christian understandings of sin have all but unilaterally focused on the sinner." I'm certain that much of Park's theology won't agree with you, yet I believe that as Christians we will want to accept the challenge to answer the penetrating question, "How does the church take on the issue of deliverance of the sinned against from their pain and suffering?" We had better be able to how know to do and how to teach precisely this sort of caring. How do we bring mercy, compassion and effective spiritual care to those on the other side of sexual sin?

I, for one, don't agree that we have neglected the victims of sin, but I would suggest that we have not done nearly as much as we might to bring Light, Life and holy consolation into the lives of these people whose suffering is real, often chronic as well as intensely private.

Let's talk about victims, shall we? A primary distinction is important, as there are real victims and then there are the pretenders, the wannabes, the sympathy soaker-uppers. Ordinarily we have a high regard for real victims. We live in a culture saturated with victims. There are victims of hunger, poverty, crime, tropical storms, hurricanes and tornadoes. We can watch an unending tidal wave of misery unfold in HDTV splendor, 24/7. We have deep compassion for these individuals whose normal lives have been torn away beneath them. We are eager to assist people who have lost their safety nets in any public drama of tragedy and despair.

We are affronted and downright exasperated, though, with what one author, Sykes, has called a nation of victims: whiney, irresponsible people who claim victim status. These are the people who blame everyone else for the misfortune in their lives; those who turn everyday difficulties into disabilities if not certifiable psychological problems. These are the people who are perpetually offended about something, and these are the people who often inhabit your office. These people give real "victims" a bad reputation. When I speak about the sinned against, I am not referring to these people.

Let me offer the tragic profile a woman whose story captures an assortment of horrors. Her life is emblematic of what it means to be sinned against. This woman, let's call her Louise, was married to a LC-MS pastor. I use her story with her permission. She asked me out to lunch during a national conference where I was speaking about depression. She said she had to talk to someone, but needed to talk privately. Louise told me that everyone believed that she and her husband were the perfect couple. Louise explained to me that her husband had confessed to her that he was gay. After almost 15 years of marriage she had never known. He explained his many absences from the family by pointing to his devotion to his sheep, his long evening meetings at church, and his extended parishioner visits, and many hospital vigils. He had lied to her about nearly everything for over a decade of marriage. When she asked her husband why he was telling her now, she assumed that he was seeking a divorce. Her husband's next revelation was more shocking than the first: he had contracted AIDS, he was very, very ill and he thought she might also be infected with the virus. He didn't want a divorce, he wanted her silence. He expected her to stand by his side. His doctor told him that he was dying. No one was to know that he was gay or that he had AIDS. She knew that if the Elders or the District President became aware of his diagnosis and his sexual sin he would lose his Call, his paycheck and they would lose their home in the parsonage.

Louise had no pastor to talk to. Her husband was her pastor. He was supposed to be her pastor. He was supposed to be her husband. She was terrified that she would contract the disease, or that one of her children would contract the disease. She didn't dare talk to the circuit counselor and there was no one she trusted from whom to seek counsel or comfort. An emotional tsunami, had just roared through her life, tearing away from her everything she had ever believed she possessed: safety, love, hope, future, trust, intimacy. Gone, in a moment. She suffered silently, constantly fearing discovery, rather than bear the humiliation and ruination that she believed would result from seeking help. She lived in a state of anxiety, shame and despair, hating her husband from that day until

the very day he died. She has spent every day of her life masquerading as though she were normal. The church mourned their pastor's death. Lots of flowers. Lots of memorials. What a great guy. He had told his parish that was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease.

The woman, now in her 70s, told me that she had never told her story to anyone before. Her husband died almost 30 years ago. She has forever been shackled to deception, lies and unhappiness, maintaining a Normal Rockwell myth about her wonderful husband, whom everyone loved. She has forfeited personal comfort, fellowship and the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren for decades. To this day she has not even told her children the truth. She has lost all respect for the church; she can bring herself to worship only occasionally. She said, "I had to tell someone before I died." I had to ask, "why me?" Her response was very telling, "you know what suffering means; knowing about suffering matters."

I remember thinking, maybe what the church needs are itinerant psychologists speaking at national conferences with whom anguished hearts can do lunch and unburden their souls.

### **To Minister to the Sinned Against is to Know Suffering**

I believe that Louise was right about suffering. When one is suffering and requires meaningful assistance, it is nearly impossible to imagine parachuting into the life of someone who has known no tribulation. Or worse, one will not seek help in the community of a church that doesn't understand suffering. Some churches would have us believe that church is an upbeat place for happy people because God has promised to be with his people, thereby insulating them from sorrow. Sometimes I fear that the new churchy culture of "I Love Jesus sing and sway music," Doctrinal McNuggets in the sermon, and special machines that launch confetti during the glorias sends the wrong message to people who suffer. You have no idea how many people I treat clinically who cannot and who will not go to church because they tell me that they would have to "fake being happy" and explain to everyone who *is* happy why they are not happy. "It's just too hard to go to church," say the sinned against. A church community and her pastor must know about suffering. Knowing about suffering matters.

One would think that the church and her clergy should be remarkably familiar with victimization and suffering. The experience of being victimized by sin is many storied and as old as Genesis. The chapters of life cataloged by the children of God are textured with sin, victimization and suffering of every sort. We are compelled to note that the very Son of God hanging naked and dying on a noon day cross, with the sins of the world laid upon His own body is the most universally moving episode of what it means to be sinned against and to suffer. Christ knows suffering and knowing about suffering matters.

Luther's letters and sermons are rich with the promise and certainty of suffering for those who would follow Christ. In His 1530 sermon "On Cross and Suffering" he preaches, "Every Christian must be aware that suffering will not fail to come." This, I assure you is

a well kept secret in quite a few churches. We have all come to believe that abundance and contentment are signs of God's grace, yet we've been allowed to assume that any personal pain or suffering may well be a sign of God's judgment and wrath. Luther writes elsewhere, "Were there only peace and no trial, we would never learn to know God Himself. In short, we could never be or remain true Christians. Trouble and distress constrains us and keep us within Christendom. Crosses and troubles, therefore, are as necessary for us as life itself." Luther understood the suffering of being sinned against. He lived it, breathed it, fought it knew it intimately and even composed hymns about it.

I assure you that very few congregations have heard anything even remarkably close to preaching of this nature. Too bad, for when we have been taught properly about suffering we are prepared to receive spiritual care that will assist us to remain steadfast during the time of suffering and buoyed by certain hope of God's sure rescue. We need to be taught that our Lord allows suffering and affliction into the lives of His children so that He can draw us closer to Himself, so that we may hold fast to Him, become entirely reliant on Him and learn to find His peace and promise in the midst of worldly tribulation.

Otherwise when suffering comes, as it surely will, we feel ambushed, betrayed by God and all the more hopeless. If we have been taught that God accomplishes in us whatever is required for our sanctification, we will be confident that God will equip us thoroughly for the doing of His will that which is pleasing to Him. Knowing about suffering matters.

Os Guinness, in his book, *Unspeaking Evil*, notes that most people suffer today under the weight of evils that he calls, "numbingly ordinary." These days, one need not be the victim of spectacularly violent verbal or sexual abuse. One need not experience the heart puncturing betrayal of marital infidelity. One doesn't have to be victimized by a spouse who plunders the family's financial nest egg to gamble or buy sexual services for an individual to have suffered.

Being "sinned against" comes in all shapes and sizes, each with the capacity to destroy hope, marriage, and life. I invite you to talk with the man whose wife explains that she simply stopped loving him years ago, but that she lives with him "for the sake of the children." The single most frequent suffering that I observe in my clinical practice is two people living in a marriage that appears to have died long ago; two people, each empty, each living in an orbit apart from the spouse, living lives of whispered resentment and disappointment. They are enslaved to their history of hurts. They recite to one another the injustices each has suffered at the hands of the other. After years of exchanging those litanies, silence is all that they continue to share. These are people who are perpetually grieving for the Godly marriage that might have been. These are people who have grown weary of pretending. Real pain is whatever hurts.

Those of us who haven't been wrapped in the shroud of pain may treat the real pain of others entirely too casually. "When we experience real pain," Guinness writes, "the devastation can be so total, the senseless irrationality so complete, the impossibility of a way out so bleak, and the combined tensions of all the conflicts so unbearable, that it

seems the only way out is to quit. Despair at least brings relief, for there is a certain welcome numbness that is the reward of no longer caring.” And you must know that despair may well result in falling away from the church, living a life of progressive isolation and taking a sabbatical from one’s faith. In its most dangerous incarnation, despair leads to the desire and perhaps the will to end all of the pain in the only way that seems possible. Some have ended their pain by ending their lives.

### **Essential Responses to the Sinned Against**

How does one respond? How does one provide life transformational assistance? How does one surround another with love, reassurance and hope at a time when some are so wounded they can barely speak their pain?

The Hippocratic Oath, written some time in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., seems an unlikely point of departure in response to that question. Yet two clauses bear particular note: First, “I will keep them from harm and injustice.” Second, “whatever, in connection with my professional practice or not, in connection with whatever I see or hear, in the life of men, which ought not to be spoken of abroad, I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret.”

The Oath was not intended to be aspirational; it was intended to guide the practice of those who were physicians. Today’s physicians of the soul would be well served by honoring the same practices, assuring that those who seek care will be kept from harm, injustice and disclosures of any sort. It’s equally useful to observe that these recommendations to honor the integrity of the person seeking care would be as valuable to family members, and friends who would hope to offer comfort to those who have been sinned against. So many of the clients with whom I work have been betrayed by the gossip of a family member or a friend. Worse some have learned that their pastor has shared a part of their story with another (in their best interests of course). As a result people are mightily reluctant to trust others. The absence of trust often results in the absence of care. People prefer to suffer in cocoons of isolation and hopelessness because there is no one in their world, personal or professional, with whom they can trust the contents of their hearts or souls.

My clients have taught me that they live as captives to fear of disclosure, fear of judgment, fear of being misunderstood, and fear of having their life story and humiliation shared with another without their knowledge or consent.

As helpers, it is easy to lose perspective. We need to be reminded again and again what it may cost a sinned against person to break their silence. Asking for help violates very well-regarded cultural principles: take care of your own business, be self-reliant, do it yourself and never allow yourself to be regarded as needy.

### **Helpers’ Responses that Worsen the Wreckage**

Be aware that when the sinned against person connects with you, it may well represent a struggle of days, weeks or even years. To phone a church office, to talk to a secretary, to show up and park in the lot in front of the church on a weekday requires great courage.

Combating great shame and fear of discovery is a full-time job for the sinned against. To ask for help is to acknowledge personal weakness, incapacity, failure, and insufficient wisdom. Asking for help may also mean permanently destroying the reputation of the sinner-spouse.

If and when we find the courage to reach out, we also fear that by the very act of reaching out, you may hurt us, too. You could reject us, trivialize our pain, coerce us to do something we don't want to do, or you could patiently sit out your hour with us, hand us a business card to see a psychologist and then be done with us. For after all, you are a busy man and you have far more important things to do. The truth of the matter is that we may be so defeated and so fragile that you can wound us terribly and you may never know it, for we won't be likely to confront you, just as it is very difficult for us to confront others in our life who sin against us.

The single most powerful, and healing manner in which to care for the sinned against is to provide spiritual care for his soul. Quite honestly, though, although the matter of spiritual care is elegantly defined by the church fathers and doctrinally well grounded, the provision of individual spiritual care is not yet a blip on the radar of many contemporary clergy. Even the language "cure of souls," may be a trifle off-putting to many clergy. When I listen to the accounts of my clients, I've noticed again and again that often, everything that Christ's church knows about spiritual care may never be used by her pastors to serve sinned against souls.

### **The Damaging Impact of Neglecting Spiritual Care**

My clients have helped me understand their disappointment and confusion when seeking care with their pastor results in distinctly non-Biblical conversation. When wounded souls do risk a conversation with their pastor, they expect to find compassion, comfort and hope. Let the record show that pastors have historically responded to the wounded by offering a listening heart and a caring spirit. Occasionally, though, the pastor's intervention and reassurance takes the form of personal reassurance, "you know I care a lot about you, and you know that I'm here for you. I'm confident that things will take a turn for the better. Hang in there. See you in church. Time heals all wounds, you know." Don't lie to us. Don't stand there with earnest face and starched collar and mumble trite encouragements.

After all, C.S. Lewis got it right when he wrote, "Time alone does not heal all wounds; if it did, we would not need physicians, surgeons, counselors, or psychiatrists. On the contrary, many untreated wounds will fester, become infected and perhaps spread poison throughout our bodies. A more accurate saying would be, "Time heals some wounds, but time also causes some untreated wounds to fester and spread. But then, that is not nearly so pithy."

An individual who turns to his pastor is not always certain how it is that his pastor can help. Nevertheless, that individual is in the pastor's office and has expressed a desire for pastoral care as opposed to seeking psychotherapy. That choice signals the individual's preference to examine the nature of his struggle through stained glass lenses. He expects

that the redemptive work of Christ is relevant to his current struggle, but in ways that he can't quite grasp or articulate

Others of my clients have pointed to their pastor's lack of confidence, or his lack of comfort in providing consolation and spiritual care once he hears that sexual sins have been committed. One client told me that talking with her pastor made her very uncomfortable because she was going to talk about her husband's addiction to pornography. She said, "the pastor looked as though I was really putting him on the spot because I know he and my husband have golfed together." She ended up consoling the pastor and saying, "I know this is really hard for you, and I'm so sorry about that; I know this is very awkward." Too bad that our church has never really warmed to the idea of merit badges to be worn on a pastor's stole – indicating, much like in the boy scouts, what tasks of pastoral care the pastor had mastered. We'd know right away which pastors could help, and which could not.

When the conversation begins orbiting around sexual themes, some pastors are visibly uncomfortable. One pastor's comment to me captures the uncertainty of many, "when it comes to this stuff, when people come into my office, I'm way over my head. I wonder how excited they'd be if told them that, "I'm just winging it here guys. I really have no idea what I'm doing."

Admittedly, some pastors have begun to believe that most parishioners' spiritual issues are really an expression of multiple, world-class psychological dysfunctions. Pastors are genuinely eager to direct help-seekers to psychologists, therapists and support groups, in lieu of providing ongoing pastoral care, hopeful that well trained others will know what to do to help. Pastors may comfort themselves with the knowledge that referrals will ensure that the wounded will surely receive sophisticated care for mind and body. The pastor is probably unaware of Freud's early opinion about psychotherapy. Freud commented that, "the best that psychotherapy can do is to return the patient to the normal level of human misery."

More and more frequently pastors begin their response to the sinned against with a personal declaration of insufficiency, often featuring gentle protestations regarding a poverty of time, a poverty of wisdom and an absence of meaningful clinical experience. Some pastors have routinely explained to their sheep, "I'm only your pastor; you need some real help."

As a result, countless wounded souls have come to believe that the church is of no real help at all if personal circumstances more challenging than pre-marital counseling emerge on the spiritual landscape. If our clergy believe they have nothing to offer – we'll believe you. We're deeply disappointed. We really had hoped that you would stand with us and talk with us about God, His saving work in Jesus Christ and that somehow, even though we know it's really hard, somehow we really hoped that you would make our faith relevant as a response to our pain. But if you tell us the church can't help, we believe you. Yet we came to see you because we would see Jesus.

Some clergy, who are less willing to relinquish the role of “helper” and “fixer” have chosen unexpected tools with which to help. They have forsaken the creeds, the Confessions and the Word in their zealous desire to give practical advice, and to be contemporary problem-solvers. Pastors pride themselves on their ability to teach people strategies for happy and effective living. That’s my job, by the way. And I spent six years of graduate school learning how to do it. Those interventions, clinical interventions, are the benefits of Blue Cross Blue Shield. Those are not the benefits of the cross of Jesus Christ. In his book, Spiritual Care, Bonhoeffer taught, “The goal of spiritual care should never be a change of mental condition...I do not provide decisive help for anyone if I turn a sad person into a cheerful one, a timid person into a courageous one. That would not be real help.” Bonhoeffer believed that any pastoral care must facilitate an encounter with Jesus Christ.

Despite the wisdom of using spiritual tools to provide pastoral care, some pastors are discarding Biblical language in their pastoral care conversations. Even though, for centuries we have taken comfort in religious explanations, religious rituals, and we’ve found refuge in the richness of the historic liturgy.

An awful lot of clergy are now using my professional language: psychological words and phrases as well as explanations and solutions for man and his predicament here on space ship earth. An awful lot of pastors are no longer regarding life as something that is uniquely spiritual. We really do require spiritual explanations and spiritual language that diagnoses and addresses our ills. For if we don’t use spiritual explanations and spiritual resources to respond to those ills, we will have been robbed of something precious and we will return to our lives bearing the shame, fear, and sin that we brought with us into the office.

For some, pastoral caring has become a monstrous CPE project run amuck as imperiled and hungry souls seeking Divine strength are offered the weak broth of self-esteem enhancement strategies, seasoned with positive thinking. When clergy confuse the goals and tools of counseling with the goals and tools of spiritual care, they have abdicated the obligation and authority given them in their Holy Call.

I’ll digress for a moment; it’s my nature. I’ve discovered that conversations regarding spiritual care of the wounded are being welcomed cautiously at pastoral conferences. Often, pastors are willing to talk about spiritual care if a psychologist speaks about topics such as “pastoral responses to depression.” Psychologists have gained surprising credibility in some areas of the church. You see, psychologists are not suspected of holding particularly cogent doctrinal positions that will offend anyone’s religious sensitivities; as a result, we are often welcomed guests. Perhaps psychologists are uniquely positioned to preach a return to spiritual care for the wounded. Perhaps if psychologists point to the astonishingly rich resources of the church and the tools of the pastoral office, clergy will once again return to embrace the reality that only spiritual care can penetrate the crushing pain of shame, guilt and betrayal with the powerful Word of forgiveness and new Life.

Let the record show that for each soul who has been sinned against, there is a soul that is also likely to suffer from genuine psychological and psychiatric symptoms. In addition to the very real spiritual pain he experiences, he may also have symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well. Pastors must clearly understand that souls are best served by a team of professionals; each professional an expert in his or her field of practice. The pastor must continue to care for the soul, the psychiatrist must make medical decisions regarding neurotransmitters and medical intervention while the psychologist assists the client to examine the debris in his life and to determine what plans will allow him to move back in the direction of living a healthy personal and professional life. All of the research shows us that when suffering individuals receive psychotherapy and medication they have the swiftest rate of recovery. I'd love to see a study regarding individuals who have received medical, psychological and spiritual care by a team of professionals who communicate with one another. I firmly believe that this kind of wholistic care is the most effective and compassionate approach to care that we can offer to any in distress

Lest I speak only of clergy, however, I need to address some remarks as well to family and friends who would assist those who have been sinned against. Clergy and loved ones alike may have the best intentions in the world and yet can end up creating additional lacerations of heart and soul for those who have already been sinned against.

Allow me to offer for your review the chief ways in which we miss an opportunity to serve the sinned against.

We fail to listen. We're so eager to stop the outpouring of pain that we fill the air with words. Our words. We launch an armada of words, surrounding the sinned against with our experience, our wisdom, our impressions, our explanations and our action plan. Yet, from the time of the ancient church fathers to the present research regarding effective therapeutic practice, the role of listening in silence to the wounded soul has been touted as essential. We need to let others tell their story without interruption, without editorial insertions, without prejudice. We are so well educated and so compassionate that we feel it somewhat foolish to sit idly while someone weeps, choking on the fact filled story he must tell. We want to stop the sobbing and move people beyond their pain. We want to take charge and rescue the person. We are wrong to do so, tears and talking are remarkably cleansing. We've got to change our philosophy of helping: people don't need a good talking to, they need a good listening to. And the heart that has been heard will feel a debt of respect, deep appreciation and affection when the gift of listening has been given.

We sometimes fail to grasp the enormity of the pain that the other has endured. In our effort to wrap our minds around the complexities of another's life, we begin to offer sweeping generalizations that seem to explain away the offender's sin or that offer nothing more than head wagging exasperation about the offender's sin. In a commendable effort not to judge others, we can wound the sinned against even more as we let people infer that it is worse to judge the sinner than it was for the sinner to have done evil. The sinned against are looking for justice and mercy, and will need to be led patiently to seek God's Divine retribution against the sinner. But if the sinned against

does not believe that her helper has been moved to a position of Christian advocacy, she will find it hard to take additional risks to seek any help. As bystanders, it seems we are forced to take sides: advocacy or palliative gestures. When we suggest that the victim understand the perpetrator, and when we explore possible explanations for the sinful conduct and if we intone that no one sin is worse than any other, we trivialize real anguish. You'll also want to eliminate this question from your repertoire of first visit comments, "What might you have done to provoke him?" You may well have forfeited the likelihood that there will be a second visit.

We also need to be aware that since our theology is remarkably rich in an understanding of the theology of the cross, we may falsely bludgeon the sinned against with the glories of suffering. We surely understand that our God will use our suffering to bless us and to sanctify us. We know suffering will not be a stranger during our Christian journey; yet because suffering is so pervasive in the Body of Christ, some stoic helper-wannabes have chosen to tout suffering to the neglect of mercy. Many of my clients have been told by their pastors or their family that, "we all have our cross to bear."

This sentiment is reminiscent of a devotion I came across in a book written in 1938, which admonishes the suffering, "Keep your suffering to yourself. Hide your tears. Do not trouble others with them, and least of all those for whom you weep."

The inference is that we should simply deal with any pain privately, suck it up, and move on. I'm reminded that if one member of the Body of Christ suffers, all suffer together. I know for a fact that the phrase, "suck it up" just doesn't appear in many Scriptural concordances because the concept is foreign to our doctrine.

We don't help anyone by saying, "take two Bible passages and call me in the morning. Be done. Be gone. Be well." There is little gained from elevating suffering to an art form and pronouncing it to be "good." That invites misinterpretation that the power for "good" rests in the experience of suffering rather than in God who works through it. We would be wise not to glorify the pain of the wounded, but instead to glorify God. Otherwise, we adopt a bizarre and fatalistic explanation that God does want us to suffer and we become resigned to the belief that it is God who wills that our pain continue.

If a pastor or other family member brings the perpetrator into the conversation there may be seemingly heartfelt apologies, rationalizations, claims that the victim misunderstood, or misrepresented the fact, or even brought it on herself. But in any case the perpetrator lobbies for getting back to normal, forgiving and forgetting and moving on. We, as bystanders, usually want to be winsome and collaborative and certainly don't want anyone to be angry or offended. The victim may not be angry or offended, but if you have neglected to take action on the allegations because its easier and you don't want to stir up a hornets' nest, you have further wounded the sinned against.

One woman told me that after three years and ten months, her pastor had still failed to take any action of church discipline against her husband. He had moved out of the family home and was known to be consorting publicly with another woman. When I called her

pastor, he acknowledged the allegations and said that he believed it was prudent to move slowly in the matter, fearing the husband would leave church fellowship if church discipline were enacted. The woman had no pastoral advocacy, no churchly vindication and felt rage whenever she saw her husband take communion at the same altar rail with her on Sunday. She left the church believing that the pastor was incapable of managing the situation Biblically. We need for our pastors and our Boards of Elders to act with compassion and wisdom and to be confident in the use of church discipline to protect those who have been sinned against as well as to address the slumbering conscience of some perpetrators.

Our pastors and elders might also want to determine how gracious and merciful their congregation is. One client, whose husband had been unfaithful to her, divorced her and remarried. Following the divorce, the woman reported that she an outcast in her own congregation. Her pastor counseled her to seek membership elsewhere, where her past wouldn't haunt her.

### **Wreaking Havoc When We're Trying to Help**

Most pastors are well trained to use God's Law and Gospel wisely in the counsel of hurting souls. Friends and family may be less sensitive to the appropriate use of Scripture to assist the sinned against.

Consider the friend who confides to another that she has prayed and prayed that God would bring her homosexual daughter back to the church. Her daughter remains a prodigal. How helpful do you think it may be for this mother to hear the Matthew 15 account of the Canaanite woman whose daughter was captive to a demon. You know the Biblical account well. She pleads with Jesus relentlessly, shamelessly and begs him for blessing, saying, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Jesus responds, "Woman you have great faith! Your request is granted." The mom seeking comfort is left to infer that her faith must be too small and that her prayer is not sufficiently tenacious. She is driven to deeper despair and finds no consolation in the Truth. And the truth is that the heart of God is extravagant in grace and gentle and loving in response to the heartbreak of His children.

Friends and family unacquainted with Scriptural Truths and pastors in a hurry often do grave disservice to God's Holy Word and its application for the life of those who suffer. Although pastors are more likely to get the exegesis correct, pastors' can leave us wounded by presuming that we know what certain Bible lessons or principles are intended to teach. One woman confided to me that her pastor had really seemed to want to help but as they ran out of time he told her, "Hang in there. Remember the Canaanite woman." She had no clue what the pastor's Biblical reference meant, nor did she have any idea just where in the Bible she might find it. She went home and looked in the dictionary. It didn't help when she read the definition, "a female member of a Semitic people that inhabited parts of ancient Palestine and were conquered by the Israelites." Another pastor offered the following shrink-wrapped rendering of the book of Job for a woman whose husband had run off, leaving her alone to care for three children under age six. He said, "don't worry, it all worked out alright for Job, it will work out alright for

you, too.” Her early Biblical knowledge led her to believe that Job was a man punished by God and turned over to Satan, but that Job works really hard to fight off Satan and wins God back in the end . . . somehow. We no longer enjoy a laity with a rich Biblical theology. Don’t presume that we do.

The absolute opposite of poor Biblical application and interpretation is exegesis in lieu of spiritual care. Or, as some have said, pastoral care that is so academic, or so spiritual that it is of no earthly help. The wounded soul doesn’t have the attention, the capacity, the interest or the desire to hear a pastor romp through ancient cultures and languages looking for morsels of comfort that might be helpful sometime this century. Sometimes, the more educated the pastor, the greater the likelihood that the wounded heart may not have a clue how to interpret the academically and historically rich offerings. Truth be told, I’ve actually come to believe that the church is really a sheltered workshop for Old Testament Scholars. Let it not be so among you.

### **What if We Apply God’s Word Faithfully? How Could that Make Things Worse?**

Someday I would like to talk with you at length about the devastation we invite when we make spiritual pronouncements and unmerciful mandates regarding how, when and in what way the victim is to forgive the perpetrator. Sometimes, motivated out of a desire to be helpful, we may coerce a soul to do something it is not ready or willing to do. We do need to talk together about how it is that we distort one of God’s greatest gifts into uncompromising, unmerciful mandates. C.S. Lewis in his *Letters to Malcolm* reported that he had finally forgiven someone after thirty years of trying and praying that he might do so.

Scripture is surely clear on the matter, “Your heavenly Father will forgive you if you forgive those who sin against you; but if you refuse to forgive them, he will not forgive you. (Matt 6:14-15) My clients have helped me to understand that sometimes forgiving a perpetrator is more difficult than the pain and shock of having been sinned against. Yet forgiveness is what our God is all about. He commands forgiveness so that we can be untethered from our resentment, rage and desire for revenge.

Holy Scripture offers no list of special circumstances that exempt anyone from His command to forgive, no matter how hideous or horrifying the situation. Our God knows that people can live in a cell of their own making for decades as captives to hate. Forgiveness is as much a matter of obedience as it is a matter of grace received. The ability to forgive another is a moment of grace-fueled transcendence that is powerful in facilitating both spiritual and emotional healing. Yet, having said all that, mandates to forgive the perpetrator probably shouldn’t be uttered in the first 30 minutes of a conversation with the sinned against soul.

Forgiveness that is coerced from the mouth of an adult or child victim will meet neither God’s requirements for a forgiving heart, nor does it meet very real emotional requirements of readiness. This is particularly true for individuals who have been victims of sexual abuse. A well-meaning pastor or friend can recite God’s mandate to forgive,

thereby precipitating decompensation and mental health fall out of all sorts. The readiness of one's mind and soul matters. The prayer-led pastor and friend will have multiple, loving, Scripture filled conversations with the sinned against. Such conversation will allow God's living Word to enable the reluctant heart to do what is required in accordance with God's will. We must trust that. At the outset we will count it as sufficient victory that the sinned against will listen hopefully to your recital of God's promises, discussed within the context of their particular situation. It's also very hopeful when the sinned against wants to be able to forgive the offender, but knows he will require some mental healing and God's own help to do precisely that. A beginning of that nature respects the medical/emotional realities of the sinned against and honors God, as well.

### **Merciful Responses to the Sinned Against**

There is no paint by number kit to assist those who have been sinned against. Nevertheless, there are specific requirements that will be most useful in responding mercifully to the wounded.

#### **1. Privacy, confidence and respect matter**

Any response to Christian hearts in pain begins after listening fully to the story of the wounded. Reassurance and consolation are essential. Reassurance that you, as friend, family or pastor will not desert them, judge them nor betray their confidence is an essential beginning.

#### **2. It's not about you: Find the proper motivation and power for helping.**

We are not entitled to conduct an interrogation, we are not entitled to demand all of the details – we are not voyeurs, after all we are helpers. We are not entitled to ask any questions just because we are curious. Beyond the objective appraisal of the facts of the case rests mercy and compassion. We are not to be caught up in our power to help and our wisdom to provide guidance. Nothing about the process of helping is about us. We give ourselves over in love to service of the neighbor. Take a look, if you will, at the example of the Good Samaritan's response to the man who fell into the hands of robbers. Luke's account of the Good Samaritan doesn't feature a CSI analysis of the details, the Samaritan asked for no explanations, he gave no editorial opinions; he offered no advice, and made no demands or judgments. He quite simply, "loved the Lord His God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength and with all his mind." As a result, he loved his neighbor as himself. Therein lies the motivation for any care you provide for the sinned against.

The power for such consolation is given through the priesthood of all believers as an extension of the grace given in Word and Sacrament. When we have been comforted by the sacrament, Luther writes,

"When you have partaken of this sacrament...you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship...Here your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, you must in turn render love and support to

Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow ...all the unjust suffering of the ... innocent.”

More simply said, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

### **3. Answer the tough questions**

We realize that God has not chosen to reveal all things to us. Yet our lives are full of questions. Why me? Why now? Why this? “Why is God punishing me? How could God let this happen if He loves me? Why won’t God answer my prayers?” For centuries these questions have echoed across the darkest moments known on earth and have been asked by an awful lot of God’s children . Why do these things happen? Because our Lord allows it. Why can’t we see God actively at work to rescue and save us from our suffering? Ah, but we have! We have seen the very heart of God revealed in the love of His Son, Jesus Christ. Remember Pilate? Remember the cross? Remember the triumph cry, “It is finished!” God has saved us for all eternity. He has not promised to insulate us from pain here in the midst of a fallen creation. Our life in Christ is hidden here on earth only to be revealed fully when our Lord comes again in glory.

Each Christian must be prepared to have Godly answers available for the toughest questions of this or any time. Thomas Oden, in his book Pastoral Theology, offers an engaging discussion of the twelve most helpful pastoral consolations that are rooted in Biblical truth. The consolations are compassionate yet candid responses to those who wonder despairingly about the misfortune in their lives. We need to be reminded: God does not directly will suffering; that God gives us free will from which evil may emerge; that God’s power may draw good out of any evil; and evil surely does not limit God’s power. Faith trusts. Faith isn’t always entitled to answers. God does refine us by fire. That’s about six hours of Bible study for pastors who are seeking an engaging Bible study for the new fall season: Answering the Big Questions.”

### **4. Review and take possession of the promises of God**

We do know what God has taught us in His holy Word. He has promised us that He will use whatever happens in our life for our good and for His glory. Such truths create the possibility for rich discussion with the sinned against soul. We need to get people outside of their own misery, for the more we look at ourselves, our experience and our pain the less we are looking at Christ. The more clearly our hearts focus upon Christ, the more unshakeable becomes the Christian’s peace. We are always pointing to God’s goodness, God’s love and God’s faithfulness in the face of evil. We read in Hebrews (2:18) “Since He Himself has now been through suffering and temptation; He knows what it is like when we suffer and are tempted and He is wonderfully able to help us.” Evil loses. God wins. God is in charge. Trust Him to love you. Trust Him to be faithful to His promises. Trust Him to care for you and heal you in accordance with His will. There’s another six hours of Bible study for the fall: “God’s Truths and Promises that Give us Comfort in the Middle of Trial and Temptation.”

Why Bible studies? Because we cannot stammer and fumble, embarrassed at our inability to speak God's Word of consolation in response to another's cry. We must be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in us.

#### **5. Assist the sinned against soul to seek psychological care**

I am a psychologist, after all. It would be irresponsible to neglect the importance of recommending care for one who has been wounded. Sexual abuse, marital abandonment, marital betrayal, family members coming out of the homosexual closet, pornographic addiction and every kind of sexual sin that you can imagine also has psychological roots and implications for healing. Many individuals tumbling through despair cannot even think clearly enough to benefit from the care that family or clergy may offer them.

There is real help and real hope for those who have succumbed to depression or anxiety. They may well require medical assistance. I would recommend, however, that you not tell the wounded person, "You need counseling." Don't be presumptive or paternalistic. To the extent that it's possible, continue to invite the cooperation of the wounded person in making good personal decisions. Suggest that a screening might be useful. It could sound something like this, "This sounds like more than any one person could manage easily. You're sounding pretty weary, or you're sounding as if it's not possible to be any more tightly wound than you are right now. I'm wondering if a screening with a doctor/counselor could help. Let's ensure that you are able to take this all on as capably as possible. See what they suggest."

#### **6. Point us to the Divine Service and the liturgy of the church**

In the face of such great burdens and so much despair, the wounded almost need a miracle for things to get better. It just so happens that miracles happen in the liturgy. Caring Christians try to reconnect hurting people with worship and the Divine Service where God has promised to be present in His Holy Word and Sacrament. We find comfort there. We find hope and peace, forgiveness of sins, Life and salvation there. Try not to be shocked, though, that some despairing souls don't immediately find comfort in the Service of the Word or in the Divine Service. Many of the sinned against feel neither inclined nor worthy enough to attend. For many, simply hearing the liturgy of the church can cause weeping. They hear the promises of love, comfort and hope intoned all around them at a time they feel spiritually destitute. Christians in pain need to hear that how we feel is simply not an index to our faith or our holiness before God. Christians need to hear that God is much at work in our lives, even when we can't detect it. We need to be patient with the Christian in pain because he will sometimes regard God's word as trite. "Yeah, yeah, I know, tell me how much God loves me, can't you just tell by looking at the mess I'm in?" Be patient and persistent in your invitations to bring people to worship or Bible study. But don't expect some sort of magic wand transformational moment. Our God has not promised to heal us in that way.

You may want to preview for the sinned against one of the most astonishing discoveries that the wounded have found in the liturgy of the ancient church.

In the Divine Service one may often hear these words, “If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” With these words, the presiding clergyman invites the congregation to join in several moments of personal meditation upon their sin before joining together in the General Confession. The Biblical origin of that part of the liturgy is I John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins” hear carefully the next promise, and He will purify us from all unrighteousness.” Not only has our God promised to forgive us the sins that we have committed against Him, in this promise, our God also pledges to cleanse us, to purify us from defilement of others sins *against us*. He removes the filth of others’ sins from our heart and soul.

One seventh grade boy with whom I work clinically had been sodomized by his older brother. He had begun refusing to go to chapel during school, he refused to go to church on Sundays. He was so ashamed. He felt so filthy. He felt he didn’t belong in church, it felt very wrong when he was there, so he just began refusing to go. He felt that being sodomized by his brother really meant that he shouldn’t be in church and that he shouldn’t be confirmed. We talked about what defilement meant. We talked about God’s promise to cleanse him and to make him holy, *undefiled* and pure before God once again so that he never, ever need to worry that his brother’s sin against him had made him unworthy to be in the presence of God.

The boy translates now the phrase in this way, “if I confess my sins God forgives me what I do wrong and de-slimes me from what my brother did.” All that is required of us is that we come, empty handed to God and speak the truth of our wounds and our defilement before him.

### **7. Help us to discover the blessing of individual spiritual care**

Sometimes the wounded require individual conversation with their pastor. Pastors will hear the lamentations of the wounded heart. They will hear the sinned against soul articulate a wide array of second table of the Law Abuses: abuse by parents, violence, sexual abuse, accounts of being stolen from gossiped about, pastors will hear sins of envy and resentment acted out against the victim. Our God came to take away the guilt and shame of all sin, even if one is the sinned against. It is God’s will that we should be freed from the defilement of others’ sin against us.

Those who are sinned against have often come to believe that they deserve to be punished: that’s a clear outgrowth of shame. Shame teaches us that we are unworthy, unlovable and that we will be rejected by people if they know anything about us. So, we recoil from relationships and love and often from God himself. The sinned against can scrupulously examine their lives past and present and they will, indeed, find all manner of aberrations called sin. Their sins need not be dramatic, but those sins create and sustain a burden of real and legitimate guilt and self blame. So, when others sin against them, there is a twisted impression that perhaps “I had it coming to me,” or maybe “I deserved it” or surely it must be that God was punishing me in the person of the one who sinned against them. A sinner who is isolated and depleted may not be able to take possession of

the absolution pronounced in the Divine Service, imagining, “if my pastor really knew what I thought, what I felt and what I did, he’d never absolve me.”

That’s why it can be so useful for a hurting soul to speak what troubles his heart in the presence of His pastor, before God. The sinner speaks what troubles him. The pastor identifies these words as a choice to speak the truth before God. The pastor explains to the penitent that he has really confessed his sin in the conversation and that our God has a sure and loving remedy. In individual confession one hears the Gospel spoken individually. He can hear God’s own Holy word of absolution from the lips of His pastor, feel His pastor’s hands on his head in blessing and know in absolute confidence that Christ’s victory over sin is His. That Christ’s defeat of Satan is His. That in Christ, he is a new and forgiven creation. This is hope and confidence to undertake all the essential and ambitious tasks of any mental and emotional healing.

John Kleinig from Luther Seminary in Adelaide, Australia believes that pastoral care should be synonymous with the use of ritual. He teaches that we must bring together liturgy and pastoral care so that we may use the means of grace to bring healing to people in pain. He teaches pastors that they are not to talk about the means of grace; they are to use the means of grace. Kleinig tells us that the sinner who seeks individual spiritual care from their pastor should expect to bring their pain into the open; that the pastor will assist them to tell God whatever it is that their enemies or loved ones have done to harm them. The pastor will help the wounded find words for the hurt and will then assist the soul to tell God, “I want justice done.” In that moment anger, revenge and hate are surrendered to God, confident that He will be faithful to His promises. With prayer and blessing, the soul is prepared to return to the Lord’s table and to receive cleansing for the blood of Jesus cleanses us and makes us holy.

### **8. Help us learn the psalms and God’s Word of hope**

The Psalms of Lamentation are particularly helpful in facilitating this conversation with hurt and angry souls for there is no book in Scripture that contains more calls for punishment of enemies than does the collection of the Psalms. The psalms begin by invoking God, telling God what has been done unto you, making recommendations to God regarding what you believe justice might look like, asking for deliverance. And having asked, you trust that God will do what is right and surrender the matter to Him. Pastoral care should facilitate that process.

### **9. Wrap us in prayer**

It is a pure gift if you can let the sinner in on a very real fact: that in the grip of despair –it is not unusual for Satan to be much at work, desiring to draw those who hurt into a cave of darkness, away from the Light of God. Also, let them know that it may be nearly impossible for some to pray. Pray with them, pray for them; carry these souls upon your back to the very throne of God at a time when they can hardly whisper “help me” to their Father in heaven. Encourage them to storm the very throne of our Heavenly Father. Look at the example of the Psalmist who was not shy to say, “Excuse me, but have you noticed my life is a raging mess down here. May I have your undivided

attention, please. I need some serious bailing out and you promised you'd be faithful. And, help us to pray with surety that our God will deliver us from evil. For we are confident that God will indeed, defeat all evil in the forgiveness of sins, for Jesus sake.

### **10. Point to hymnody**

As I work with clients who have been sinned against, or who are despairing, I will ask that they look through their hymnals to identify hymns that remind them of God's love, God's triumph over Satan, sin and evil, hymns that provide immediate comfort and consolation. I ask them to commit some verses to memory to sing in the dark moments and the bleak and difficult days. I ask them to find verses to sing in the moments they are tempted to anger or when they fear that they may be swallowed by shame or anxiety. As a psychologist, I can assure you that whenever you want someone to learn something, all you need to do is cast your story in song. Trolling through the treasury of hymns in the sections of "Cross and Comfort" or the "Lenten hymns" often leave people weeping with the beauty of the hymn and the promise of God's Word. We need to sing our creed. We need to sing the facts of our faith. We need to sing the redemptive gifts of Christ. Song embeds in our heart for all time the truth of our magnificent God. And we ponder these truths as the strains of ancient songs join with refrains from songs in this day to celebrate the miraculous story of our faith. And the music fills our minds and hearts, stops our self-destructive ruminations and God's truth tumbles into our lives to soothe us, comfort us, guide us and help us through each day.

Finally, help us to receive in our empty hands the gifts of Christ, teach us to ask for prayer and blessing; for anything God has promised, the pastor may bestow in blessing. Teach us that it is indeed, God, from whom all help comes, and it is our God who will first open our mouths to praise and then to taste His life-sustaining grace in the holy Sacrament.

Many of us have attended this conference with a desire to learn, to understand and to become more aware of the facets underlying a vision for Christian sexuality and Christian marriage. Visions are good things. Yet, most of us want "to do." We want to teach; we want to write; we want to help, to preach, and to catechize. We want to provide rescue, remedy and pastoral care. As a result, I, like many of you am hopeful that this conference is only the first of many others -- for quite candidly we will need to be equipped to take on the task before us.

The task of responding to the question, "what can we do?" is best answered one person at a time. That's how revolutions ordinarily begin: one person at a time. Committed, caring hearts become torch-bearers of God's Light and Truth in whatever our vocation may allow.

But before we begin the revolution, let's be sure that we have not neglected to care for the many souls who have already been casualties: the sinned against, the suffering and those desperately in need of Christian love, compassion and mercy.

May our most holy God bless richly your efforts to serve those who need His own Life, love, help and hope.

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