Ann Garrido, D.Min.

Embracing Discord:

Preparing Ministers for Healthy Conflict

As a child, one of my favorite sections of the Bible was the opening of the book of Acts. I loved hearing the story about the thousands of people drawn in by the preaching of the apostles, who handed their possessions over to the nascent Christian community, and lived "happily ever after." Hearing my father speak of his struggles in the business world, I considered how ideal it would be to work in the church with people motivated only by good and holy intentions in an environment void of conflict—the church as painted in the book of Acts.

My first high school job as evening parish receptionist was quite an eye-opening experience as I watched four priests of varying generations and ecclesiologies wrangle with one another and a strong-willed housekeeper to exercise pastoral leadership in a bustling, boisterous Catholic community. It turns out that sometimes keys get lost, the gym gets double-booked, sisters yell, priests cuss and no one remembers to empty the dishwasher. Not everyday, but enough to leave an impression: the Catholic Church is not a place where people live "happily ever after."

One of the great gifts of graduate studies in theology was the opportunity to discover the letters of Paul. Written decades before the Gospels and the book of Acts were put onto parchment, Paul's epistles reveal a church riddled with discord even from its earliest days. Only a few years after the tomb was found empty, Jesus' disciples were already debating how to handle money, what kinds of public behaviors were appropriate for Christians, and what to

do about economic disparity in their midst. They had differing views on the role of women, how to handle interreligious marriage, and wages for their ministers. Many of the challenges that we know today, they knew as well. It turns out that there was never a time in which the church was without conflict, and yet, two thousand years later, the church goes on.

The story I tell of my own journey is not unique. It mirrors the journey of almost every minister in the Church—a pattern of attraction and disillusionment, hope and coming to terms with reality. What distinguishes ministers who are able to live meaningfully within the church as it is from those frustrated in their attempts to live "happily ever after" is the ability to live and function within a church in discord. Indeed, I would argue that the single most determinative factor in whether or not a religious, priest, or lay minister fresh from studies will thrive or flail in their early years of ministry has to do with their comfort, capacity and skill-level surrounding conflict.

Given the prominent place that conflict plays in ministerial success, it makes sense that ministerial formation programs will want to consider how they can prepare candidates well for the realities of life lived in communion with others. In this essay, I want to introduce four components of a holistic model for conflict education and suggest possible means for integrating these components into a formation program.

ARTICULATE A HEALTHY, POSITIVE THEOLOGY OF CONFLICT FROM THE START

Often, the most foundational shift any ministry candidate has to make toward a healthy relationship with conflict is a paradigmatic one. Conflict, in much of Christian thought, is understood as a consequence of sin: God had intended for the world to live in harmony but sin caused discord.

As a result, Christians tend to see the presence of conflict in their community as a sign of sin, a sign that something has gone terribly wrong and needs fixing. Because sin is by definition a chosen evil—something we could have resisted but did not—it implies that some party must be to blame for the conflict.

Many persons drawn into ministry hold this understanding of conflict. Because they have committed themselves vocationally to strive for holiness, it is important to them to separate themselves from sin and, hence, from conflict. For those who tend to absorb responsibility in any given situation, the presence of conflict will set off internal triggers, "What did I do wrong? I must not be a very good person or this would not be happening." For those who have a propensity to shift responsibility, the presence of conflict will set off another set of questions, "Who is to blame? How can we clarify what went wrong here and call those at fault back to the right path?"

The Christian tradition, however, can offer a wider, more nuanced theology of conflict. While sin certainly escalates much of the conflict in our world–raising it to the level of violence, bitterness and even war–the roots of conflict seem inherently structured into the design of creation itself. God created the world with a tremendous amount of diversity, and indeed, seems to glory in it. Diversity implies not just diversity of species and skin color, but also diversity of cultures, opinions and perspectives. Exposure to diversity, with its resulting experience of discomfort, surprise and disagreement, appears to be the way that God grows creation, bringing it forward toward the Parousia.

Conflict in scripture is not synonymous with an absence of divine presence. Jesus' disciples argued with one another, even as he was in their midst. In his teaching, he indicates that his followers would continue to have problems amongst themselves and gave them strong advice about forgiveness and talking to one another face-to-face before talking to others about the matter. Conflict is simply a part of life as a Christian; the more significant issue is how to respond constructively to it.

Studies of Christian communities indicate that those reporting little or no conflict are more likely comatose than models of robust discipleship. People only argue about issues they find important; communities want members who feel passionately about their mission and vision. Psychologist John Gottman's parallel research on healthy marriages discovered that couples that had one negative encounter per every five positive encounters experienced the most stable, enduring marriages. More negativity placed couples at a greater risk of divorce, but curiously, less negativity often indicated an even greater risk. Couples who reported very little conflict often had opted out of the relationship emotionally and mentally.

Ministry formation programs will want to establish a "theology of conflict" to undergird their efforts. Alongside the articulated mission and outcome statements for the ministry program should be an intentional statement about how conflict will be understood in the formation process. In the ministry program I oversee, we have taken to having the students read a text on difficult conversations as part of the orientation to the program. "We are going to be spending a lot of time with each other as a group over the next four years," I say. "And we're going to be talking about things about which we feel very deeply. It is inevitable that at some time in the coming years we are going to disagree with each other, hurt one another, irritate one another. It would be very sad if we never admitted such things, because we would have missed a great opportunity for growth. So, before we ever have the chance to disagree, let's think about how we want to handle conflict when it happens." Giving candidates vocabulary and tools for conflict before they need them is easier than introducing them in the midst of a conflict. It lets them know conflict is normal; it is part of the spiritual journey rather than foreign to it; and, we have ways of transforming it for the sake of growth in holiness.

Exercises

- Have each candidate write a story about a conflict he witnessed in his own family as a child and the lesson about conflict he took away from it. Explore within the formation community how our experiences of conflict in family have shaped differing perspectives on the meaning and value of conflict. Is it to be avoided or welcomed? Can relationships survive conflict or does it inevitably end them? Is it possible conflict can deepen a relationship?
- Have members of the formation community create a

"Conflict Charter" at the beginning of their time with one another in which they decide on guidelines for how they want to handle disagreements with one another in the future. To what are they willing to hold themselves accountable in times of discord?

CULTIVATE CAPACITIES NEEDED TO REMAIN IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT

Few people upon finding themselves in the midst of a conflict think, "Oh, excellent, I have been awaiting just such a growth opportunity!" Rather, most find conflict a very uncomfortable state in which to dwell and express their discomfort in a variety of ways ranging from total avoidance of the neuralgic topic to wanting immediate conversation and resolution. One of the greatest helps we can offer ministry candidates in our programs is to cultivate the capacities needed to remain within the conflict without ignoring or rushing it.

The choice of the term "capacity" is intentional. Often, conflict management is taught as a set of quaint phrases or techniques to be employed in times of disagreement (e.g. "Use 'I feel' statements.") But, unless these phrases and techniques are undergirded by a set of attitudes, they bear little fruit, and indeed become the source of ridicule. Healthy conflict requires not just a change of language but also a real conversion of mind. Capacities required for healthy conflict include:

Curiosity: While rarely listed as a virtue, curiosity is perhaps one of the most important habits to be cultivated in the spiritual life. Without curiosity, a person is unable to learn or to change, for without curiosity, a person lacks the inner fire that drives the desire to understand more. In a difficult conversation, the person without curiosity assumes she already understands the situation at hand and already knows where she stands. On the other hand, the person who is able to remain curious, even in conflict, has the capacity to turn the conversation into a learning conversation in which new insight can be gleaned, including information about how the other perceives the matter and how the other feels. The curious person can remain open enough to receive additional data that might change how she looks at the situation.

Sense of Self-Worth: A solid sense of self-worth implies knowledge of oneself–both one's strengths and one's shortcomings. It also implies an acceptance and love of self, even if not perfect. A sense of self-worth makes it possible for persons to receive new information, even feedback about their own role in the situation, becoming neither defensive nor defeated. Persons possessing a sense of self-worth know themselves well enough to realize that they likely did contribute something to the conflict. At the same time, they know that their perspective is still worth sharing. Difficult conversations done well require curious listening, but they also require assertion. Without a sense of self-worth, persons have a hard time valuing their own dignity and inserting their own voice into the conversation.

Comfort with Emotions: A common misconception about conflict assumes that conflicts are best solved when people "stick to the facts" and "leave personal feelings out of the matter." In reality, the conversation would not be a difficult conversation if feelings were not involved, and rather than ignore their role in the conflict, it would be better to bring them out into the open. Willingness to address emotions, however, implies the capacity to first be aware of emotions, to name them and to accept their presence. For ministry candidates, this can be particularly difficult.

We can be intentional about constructing a formation environment in which wondering aloud is encouraged, questions honored, emotions taken seriously and each person encouraged to speak.

Many have been socialized to believe that certain emotions–especially those emotions most commonly present in conflict such as anger, impatience and frustration–are unholy. And, again, if one's pursuit of a ministerial vocation is part of a larger quest for holiness, the presence of these emotions seems contradictory to one's vocation. The person who is able to acknowledge his or her own feelings, and to distinguish having these feelings from acting on them, will be able to better acknowledge and receive the expression of others' emotions as well.

Capacities, unlike skills, are generally easier "caught" than "taught." Lectures on curiosity or self worth are likely to do little toward the overall outcomes of our formation programs. But, we can be intentional about constructing a formation environment in which wondering aloud is encouraged, questions honored, emotions taken seriously and each person encouraged to speak. Although these practices are not exclusively conflict practices, they nurture the capacities that will be needed in times of conflict.

Exercises

- Ask candidates to bring to mind a time when they were really angry with another person and to roll through the entire episode in their imagination. Then ask them to write an account of the event from the point of view of the person with whom they were so angry. Explore the candidates' reactions to the writing exercise. What parts of the story did they begin to realize they did not know? About what did they become curious in the course of writing?
- In pairs, have one person tell the story of a significant event in his life, pausing every thirty seconds. During the pause the other person simply names the feelings he heard radiating from the storyteller. The storyteller is free to acknowledge or nuance with greater accuracy the feelings before going on with the story.

INTRODUCE SKILLS FOR MOVING BEYOND CONFLICT

Being able to remain in conflict is important, yet no one wishes to set up a permanent abode there. Capacities for conflict must be complemented by skills that enable one to move beyond the conflict. Specific skills can be taught and should be integrated into the curriculum of a formation program, including:

Listening Skills: Many ministry candidates genuinely care for others and want to listen deeply to them, but have a difficult time conveying what they intend. They are curious, but they aren't able to communicate effectively their interest. Simple techniques like good eye contact, leaning in toward the person speaking and non-verbal acknowledgements like nodding are easy to develop. They can make a real difference in ordinary conversation, and even more so in difficult conversation. Candidates should also be introduced to rudimentary practices associated with active listening (e.g. ability to paraphrase what the other has said or attentive silence). If these are practiced outside of real-life conflict, they can become second nature in the midst of actual conflict, allowing the other party to feel better heard.

Problem Solving Approaches: Often conflicts seem irresolvable because the parties are each locked into their respective positions and see the other party as the problem. Progress, however, can be made when we separate the problem from the opposing party and view the opposing party as a potential ally in solving a shared problem. The question then becomes: How can we work through this together? What are some creative options? Are there other possibilities to meet our respective interests beyond the positions with which we came? Frequently opposing parties share many of the same interests, but merely hold differing opinions about the best way of realizing those interests. Candidates benefit tremendously from learning the difference between positions and interests, as well as strategies for creating new options.

Conflict Discernment Skills: Triangulation features prominently in many ministerial conflicts. Persons often prefer to talk about the conflict with others rather than directly to the person with whom they have the prob-

lem. They also may find themselves wrapped into conflicts which are not really their own, but rather a fellow community member's. As a result, many ministry settings become toxic with misdirected frustration that hangs in the environment like an intangible fog. As one of my colleagues once advised me about my own proclivities in this direction, "You want your anger to be a like a coursing river rather than a finely diffused mist." Ministry candidates benefit from a mental rubric they can run through in considering a conflict to help them decide whether or not they should initiate a conversation, and, if so, with whom and toward what end. I have found the handouts from Triad Consulting Group (available at http://diffcon.com/HelpYourself) to be especially useful in assisting candidates to think through a potential conversation before it happens. Frequently in the process, a candidate will realize that the conflict is predominantly within him and that the difficult conversation is an internal one. By changing one's own contribution to the situation, the dynamic can automatically shift.

Exercises

- Ask each candidate to call to mind a "hot button" political or ecclesial issue about which she has strong feelings. Then have each candidate choose a partner in the group who could argue the other side of the issue. Have this partner try to persuade the candidate of the opposing position. The candidate's role is to try to engage her active listening skills in the conversation, even as she hears a position with which she disagrees. She is to attempt to restate accurately what the other person is saying and to ask open-ended, curious questions, while conveying with her posture and eyes that she wants to understand the other better.
- Using either a prepared case study (or a story of conflict shared by one of the candidates), have the formation group identify the two opposing positions present in the case on the far corners of a blackboard. Then list what each party's interests are underneath its position. Finally, in the middle of the board, brainstorm other ways that the parties' interests might be met beyond their positions.

MODEL A COMMUNITY MADE STRONGER BY ITS CONFLICTS

It seems obvious: formation communities that want emerging ministers to develop healthy conflict practices should model those practices themselves in community. People learn how to do conflict well by seeing conflict done well. They overcome their fears about conflict fracturing a community by experiencing a community that repeatedly not only survives conflict, but grows stronger through it.

Equally obvious: this is much easier said than done.

As a formation team, it is useful to periodically review: Are we modeling the behavior we espouse? Are we aware of the way our life with one another is formative, distinct from whatever our planned curriculum might be? If the ministry candidates were to absorb our preferred way of dealing with conflict, what would they be taking away with them?

The formation community is a place for candidates to try out new approaches to conflict and test new ways of responding. Some of these are going to feel awkward and unnatural at first. Occasionally there will be grand failures. So, the team will also want to ask itself: Is this environment a safe place to make mistakes? Can we be encouraging of those who are trying to let go of old patterns of behavior, but have not yet arrived at something new?

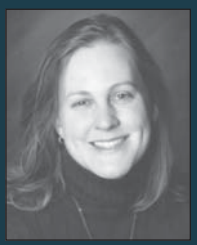
Exercises

- Invite pairs of religious, married couples, or ministry staff to tell the story of a time in their life with one another when conflict done well strengthened their relationship rather than ended it. What enabled the conflict to be a positive experience in the long haul rather than negative? What did they learn from the experience that they still rely on now in conflict?
- When a conflict arises in the formation community, treat it as an opportunity for learning and practicing good conflict skills. Take time for each person to prepare for the discussion using some of the discernment tools described above. Before the discussion recall together the listening and problem solving skills that have been part of the learning during the year. Afterwards, process together, "What did we do well here? What really seemed to work? What did we not do well in addressing this conflict together? Where do we need more work?"

CONCLUSIONS

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' final dinner with the ministers he had been forming was marked by a long closing discourse in which he relayed all that he most wanted them to remember before he departed. At the center of his teaching that night was a parable in which he described himself as the True Vine and his disciples as the branches. Repeatedly, he used one verb to express what he wanted them to be able to do in the time ahead, difficult though it may be: he wanted them to "remain."

Intentional, holistic preparation for dealing with the perennial conflicts of church life is one of the greatest gifts we have to offer new ministers in our formation programs. For, when we nurture the vision, capacities and skills for conflict done well, we are proffering a pathway for "remaining" in the ministry and in the Vine. We are giving the means for living not a life "happily ever after" but life "in abundance," the life Jesus does promise us, even in the midst of our bustling, boisterous communities.



Ann Garrido, D.Min., teaches at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis. She is Director of the Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, Associate Professor of Homiletics, and formerly directed the Doctor of Ministry Program in preaching.