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a blessing – is
there a place
for touch in the
Church today?

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In Gen 32 Jacob was terrified of meeting his brother Esau whose inheritance and blessing he had stolen by deceiving his father many years before. He was alone and vulnerable; fearful that Esau was coming to destroy him. In this moment when everything he had achieved was in danger of being stripped away, he wrestled with the living God, his life and troubled conscience. In that honest and challenging encounter, he received a blessing that opened the way for him to walk into a new dawn. Wounded, chastened, and wiser a new future beckoned. The Church finds itself in such a moment having been publicly and painfully called to account and chastened; rightly so.

In the light of the scandal of sexual abuse the Church wrestles for a blessing as we consider the role of touch in our pastoral practice. There are priests who do not visit their parochial schools for fear of contact with children that may be misinterpreted. Grandparents and other close relatives of children are wary of open displays of affection. Teachers feel constrained when a child needs comfort. Their natural instinct is to provide support by means of touch, but they hold back unsure what to do. The establishment of safeguarding guidelines and transparent reporting processes has been long overdue and this should not be undermined in any way.¹ At the same time it needs to be recognized that this is only *part* of the solution. As Oxenhandler observes: “A climate of extremes is not the one that best protects our children ... when the repertoire of touch is severely limited – so that touch is construed as always and only sexual – children are actually at greater risk of being

1 For a very helpful book on the role of boundaries see Arden F. Mahlberg and Craig L. Nesson, *The Integrity of the Body of Christ: Boundary-Keeping as Shared Responsibility* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016). They rightly claim that while good boundary keeping requires some sacrifice and discipline it is ultimately about love.

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touched in sexually explicit ways.”² We have an obligation to ensure that all people, especially children and vulnerable adults, will be safe. There is the risk that all touch is being seen through a sexualised filter. This will be harmful in the long run, and unintentionally undermine the legitimate role that touch can play in pastoral settings.

The rights of children, and indeed all of us to be safe, are rightly paramount and yet there is the danger that a critical part of our development and relational life, namely touch, is being avoided in such a way that may be harmful in ways that are not intended. As Cristina Traina has powerfully expressed it: “It seems safer to erect strict barriers rather than risk the health and future of even a single child. Yet the moment when something is most suspect is when we most need to hold ourselves back from indiscriminate overreaction and examine it more carefully.”³

TOUCH IN THE SCRIPTURES

The dilemma about whether to touch or not that we are confronting today is reflected within the scriptures themselves where the potential for human touch to harm or heal, to give life or to take it is more than evident.

Jesus prohibited Mary Magdalene to touch him after the resurrection (John 20:17) and yet soon after Thomas was commanded to put his fingers and hand into Jesus’ side (John 20:27). These two passages from the same Gospel indicate that any discussions about touch require deeper reflection and greater levels of sophistication. In the face of such texts it is not surprising that we are confused about the role of touch within ministerial settings. From the beginning a shadow is cast over touch when the first couple were commanded not to touch the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or eat of its fruit (Gen 2:16-17). We have indeed gained knowledge of good and evil through touch, and we have learned that, at times, at the price of much suffering. Isaac, blind and aged, was deceived into blessing the wrong son when he touched the skin of a goat thinking it was his son Esau (Gen 27:16; 23). Eglon was killed when Ehud greeted the king with his empty right hand as a sign of his peaceful intentions. The deception was due to the fact that his left hand contained a blade that would take Eglon’s life (Judg 3:21). Jesus was betrayed by a false kiss on the part of Judas (Mark 14:44). Yes indeed, touch can be the means by which we are deceived, robbed and betrayed.

2 Noelle Oxenhandler, *The Eros of Parenthood: Explorations in Light and Dark* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2001), 10.

3 Cristina Traina, “Touch on Trial: Power and the Right to Physical Affection,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, 1 (2005): 3-34. 4.

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The example of the first couple shows how touch can be the means by which we grasp for what is not ours, thereby violating the boundaries God has set for us. The example of Jacob and his father Isaac highlights how touch can be used to take away the rights of another person, and Eglon's misreading of body language tragically leads to his death. Judas' kiss brings into relief how a sign of affection can be misused in such a way that it leads to violation and betrayal.

On the other hand, the *positive* role of touch is demonstrated in Jesus' touch of lepers (Mark 1:41), the blind (Mark 8:22-25), and the deaf (Mark 7:32-33). As Peter is drowning, he calls out for help and Jesus immediately reaches out to save him (Matt 14:30-31), and touch is involved in raising Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:23, 41), and the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:14).

Many will bring people, both young and old, to Jesus to be touched by him (Mark 3:10; 6:56; 10:13), and there are others who reach out to touch him such as the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:28), and the woman who washes his feet and kisses them while he is at table (Luke 7:36-50). Within the ministry of Jesus and the early church the laying on of hands is well attested - not only for healing, but commissioning, and for the reception of the Holy Spirit (Mark 6:5; 8:25; 10:16; Acts 6:6; 8:17; 9:12,17; 13:3; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). The positive role of touch in the task of building and sustaining community is seen in the practice of greeting one another with a holy kiss (1 Thess 5:26; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:13; Rom 16:16; see also 1 Pet 5:14).

TOUCH IN THE HELPING PROFESSIONS

It is instructive to learn that the helping professions also share many of the same concerns about touch as those involved in ministry. There is no question that touch is an essential element of human life. Thomas St. James O'Connor speaks of the role of touch as presenting an existential and therapeutic dilemma since research clearly indicates how touch is necessary for human life to flourish.

"There is a growing body of research that indicates that caring touch is necessary for human functioning and for humans to thrive, from birth to death. To live in a world where there is the absence of caring touch or very limited touch can produce physical death as well as emotional and spiritual death."⁴

The prevailing guidelines have been to avoid touch in

4 Thomas St. James O'Connor, "Exploring Touch," in Martin Rovers, Judith Malette and Manal Guirguis-Younger *Touch in the Helping Professions: Research, Practice and Ethics*. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2017), 1-9. 2.

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professional and therapeutic settings. Despite that various studies have revealed that 41% of psychologists in the American Psychological Association hugged their clients, that up to 70% of therapists incorporate some touch in their work with clients.⁵

Therapists face the same challenges as those in ministry with the possible dangers of abuse of power, the crossing of professional boundaries, inappropriate attachments and sexual abuse. “For touch to be healing, abundant knowledge about the power of touch, for good and for bad, needs to be balanced with great sensitivity for those who are our clients.”⁶

One of the developments in the therapeutic use of touch is that of ensuring that the power imbalance is raised and explicitly addressed by seeking permission. If touch is incorporated in any way then its purposes need to be made clear, and the client must grant permission. Gelb in 1982 reported that when touch had been successfully incorporated into the psychotherapeutic process the boundaries were clearly identified, the touch was experienced as consistent with what was agreed, the client experienced being in control of the process, and that there was a clear sense that this was to assist the client rather than the therapist.⁷

While there is no consensus about how to introduce touch into a therapeutic relationship there is no doubt that the wariness is not because touch could not help, but from the awareness of how many factors have to align in order for it to be safe and effective.

The setting in which touch takes place in therapy needs to be borne in mind. Such therapy is often undertaken in a one on one setting which leaves both client and therapist in a position of vulnerability on many levels. Within the life of the Church confessional boxes were introduced for the same reason, and this same wisdom is reflected in many current guidelines and practices that have as their aim to safeguard both the minister and members of their congregations. Fortunately, there are many ministerial settings that are public. In these settings safeguarding issues can be addressed where the oversight of others ensures that touch is appropriate, and as life-giving as it needs to be.

TOUCH IN MINISTRY

At the present moment there is a danger of seeing all touch as sexual or potentially abusive, but touch is also potentially positively transformative, and has always been part of Jesus’ ministry and embedded in the life of the Church. There is much more that needs

5 Martin Rovers, Judith Malette and Manal Guirguis-Younger, “Issues of Touch: An Overall View and Integration,” in *Touch and the Helping Professions*, 237-248, 240.

6 *Ibid.*, 244.

7 *Ibid.*, 241.

to be considered here and brought into the conversation. Touch plays an important part in ministry as a sign of support, compassion, encouragement and comfort. It can play a critical role in breaking down isolation when people are suffering and vulnerable.⁸ We know that it is this very vulnerability that has been used by those who abuse. This is precisely why safeguarding policies and ministerial guidelines have been developed and implemented.

The Church's life is embodied and touch embedded into our sacraments. The sacrament of baptism is replete with moments involving physical contact through the sign of the cross, anointings, and the ephthatha prayer. The sacrament of anointing of the sick derives part of its effectiveness precisely because touch is involved – touch that encourages, comforts and strengthens a person in moments of serious sickness and as they come face to face with their own mortality. Every eucharistic celebration freely acknowledges our weakness, sin and vulnerability also includes the sign of peace – a reminder that we need to both receive communion, and be in communion with each other.

Makant has explored the role that the sacrament of anointing might play for some victims of trauma where touch can play a positive and healing role. The suggestion is not that this would always be appropriate, not at all, but “Insofar as violent touch, then, has been that which both binds and isolates, it is healing touch that can bind in communion.”⁹

On a *pastoral level* what is to be done? For some people a comforting or encouraging hug or hold of the hand is both spontaneous and appropriate, mutually appreciated and up-building. The same gesture with another person can be experienced as intrusion, an exercise in power, or a sexual advance depending on individual temperament, life history and culture. In the Western context one in four women has experienced some form of sexual, physical or verbal abuse, and one in six men. This clamours for recognition that will have an impact on our pastoral practice.

One person I know always found the sign of peace deeply unsettling and disturbing and it was only in mid-life that they came to the realization they had been abused as a child by a so-called friend of the family. Sadly, there are all too many deeply wounded people among us and the primary concern must be how to care for

8 Patrick McCormick, “Just the right touch,” *US Catholic* June 1999: 46-48; David Briggs, “Some Church goers welcome a hug,” *Christian Century* August 21 2007:15.

9 Mindy Makant, “Transforming Trauma: The Power of Touch and the Practice of Anointing,” *Word & World* 34, no 2 (2014): 160–67, 166. For other articles on the role of touch see Linda Sieh, “Reclaiming the Church’s Healing Ministry,” *Chaplaincy Today* 15:2 (1999): 17-22 and Mark Ettlting, “The sacrament of touch.” *National Catholic Reporter* Feb 9-22 (2018):15.

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them sensitively and appropriately.

Tara M. Owens has written an inspiring book entitled *Embracing the Body: Finding God in our Flesh and our Bone*. In it she writes of her own journey towards wholeness as a victim of sexual abuse. She writes powerfully and beautifully, describing how she has reclaimed her own embodiment as graced and beautiful. She incorporates touch into her own ministry. Part of the solution that she offers aligns with those therapists who engage in touch in their practice, and that involves the permission of the client.

“I always touch people with permission. I don’t go in for a hug without asking first, and I’m not already moving forward in such a way that whoever I’m hugging almost has no chance to refuse. I touch with permission – only, always – because I’ve been touched without permission, without wanting to be touched, and the violation that it is goes so much deeper than the surface of my skin. The question of permission is a critical one.”¹⁰

The incorporation of touch in ministry is a highly sensitive and complex matter that resists simple solutions since so many factors need to be considered including: the possible abuse of power, how touch is perceived by giver and receiver, and the intention of the person who touches.¹¹ How touch is given, received and interpreted will be influenced by culture, gender and age. The one touching in the course of their ministry needs great self-awareness, pastoral sensitivity, and discipline as to when it is beneficial, and when it is inappropriate and damaging or harmful for the recipient - however well-intentioned it may be. In every pastoral situation the needs of the person who is *not* the minister must come first.

As Purnell writes “When a pastor is able to attend with discipline to the body-life of the other, and at the same time to be aware of the implications of that engagement for his or her own body, then he or she will be able to set appropriate boundaries and engage, move into the space of the other appropriately.”¹²

CONCLUSION

So what blessings have we received in this moment of wrestling? At all times we are called to choose life and to preserve it. When it comes to touch both refraining and incorporating it in ministry have their time and place. Given all that has happened through

10 Tara M. Owens, *Embracing the Body: Finding God in Our Flesh and Bone* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 119.

11 Zach Thomas, ‘The Intention of Touch in Pastoral Care,’ *Chaplaincy Today* 15 no 2 (1999): 23-28. Leslie Hall “‘And Greater Works than These’: Healing Touch in Pastoral Practice.” *Chaplaincy Today* 15, no 2 (1999): 50-53.

12 Douglas Purnell, “Pastoral Ministry and the Fleshly Body,” *Pastoral Psychology*, 53 no 1 (2004): 81-85. 85.

the sexual abuse scandal it is to be expected that there has been a tendency to view touch predominately through the filter of sexuality and danger, but this is not all that can be said, or needs to be.

Jesus and the early Church incorporated touch into their ministry and the Church rightly continues to do so in its pastoral outreach and sacramental life. Yes, it is inherently a risky business, but it is an essential part of our *embodied existence* that is called to be a sign of life, hope, compassion and care. We owe it to each other to get it right so that “Where we walk becomes hallowed ground, those we touch have the possibility of being touched by the very life of God.”¹³

13 Tara M. Owens, *Embracing the Body: Finding God in Our Flesh and Bone*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 176.

No-to rugged individualism! In opposition to such individualism, the Christian ethos insists on the common good, the solidarity of all creatures – human beings among themselves and in relationship to the environment – and the preferential option for the poor. The Catholic tradition today not only recognizes political and civil rights such as the right to religion, speech, press and assembly but also social and economic rights such as the right to food, clothing, shelter, education and health care.

– KRISTIN E. HEYER, JAMES F. KEENAN, ANDREA VICINI, eds. *Building Bridges in Sarajevo* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books) p. 140.