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Corona Virus,
Passion and
Parish Ministry

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I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals ... style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities (Evangelii Gaudium #33).

When your priestly, episcopal or religious service to humanity begins to be pressed beyond the limits of the familiar you are likely to behave, to think and to respond differently. You may be jolted into questioning the values of your previous daily routine, values that once gave your life its meaning. The bible is full of these situations, especially in the lives of the prophets, who were so often asked to go far beyond, indeed, to break away from, their own previously comfortable lives.

Something else can happen to you too. The deeper you're sucked into a convulsing human drama, the more real you seem to become. The more you face yourself alone. The more you interpret and reinterpret your vocation. And the more you ponder the urgency, the perceptions, and the evangelical outlook and outreach of the institutions you represent. I think nowadays they call it a *reality check*. It affects pastoral ministry too. You can easily find yourself in a no-man's-land of church ministry and practice. For example in critical times of major social threat or change should ministers and priests remain in their church rectories, manses or presbyteries and leave 'politics' to the laity? At what point must we realise that it's time to act together?

When there is a tragic death, should we insist on ministering to the deceased of our own denomination only? Or should we use this as an occasion to preach our own church dogmas, deities and doctrines? Should we be unduly concerned about conformity, clerical decorum or the precision of rubrics when carrying

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out our duties to the troubled people of God in life threatening circumstances?

There is nothing in pastoral manuals about '*crisis ministry*'. When great human suffering strikes the parish or diocese and bangs urgently at grand presbytery doors what do we do? Traditionally, ministers and priests of the world are obliged to *discern* prayerfully what steps to take in any urgent pastoral situation. That's my own experience. Even as I write the Corona virus has brought the West, indeed the world, to its knees.

LESSONS FROM RECENT HISTORY

The following is an attempt to tease out some experiences of past ministry that took place, of necessity, in circumstances far beyond our control or imagination. It was during political unrest. Lockdown also happened in South Africa in this period. And the clergy rallied driven by prophetic voices that had been there unrecognised or that only emerged when crisis broke upon us. It's so important to recognise them at the right moment and not be diverted by jaded voices advocating traditional "prudence" even in abnormal times. The Holy Spirit, fortunately, doesn't work that way. Yes, during the uprisings in South Africa in the 1980s, we priests and ministers of all denominations did plan together; and together we prayed. We did take risks together; and we were arrested and taken to court together. Together we did fear the police and army, but together we never stopped trying.

And we did ecumenism – but we never called it ecumenism. We just did it because it was the right thing to do; it was the human thing to do; it was the Christian thing to do; it was the love thing to do; it was the compassion thing to do. As local church leaders we were expected to be out there in the forefront, at the cutting edge of apartheid society where God, we knew from Exodus 3:7, was the one who sees the misery, hears the cries and knows the suffering of His people.

Looking back much later, when the dust had settled on a new South Africa, it was clear to me that the success of our '*crisis ministry*' was almost certainly due to the pastoral and ecumenical character of our initiatives.

The following discussion of emergency pastoral ministry is obviously not a blue print for all situations. Pastors will share, analyse, pray, listen and risk their own local solutions. The following are *seven* emergency ministries that worked during political shutdowns in South Africa.

Underpinning our apostolic service was, firstly, a *ministry of peace-making*, which implied, in the long term, trying to understand

and interpret the ‘signs of the times’ in the light of Luke 12 verse 56: ‘You superficial people! You understand the signs of the earth and the sky, but you don’t understand the present times.’

Secondly, we engaged in a *ministry of presence*, where priests and ministers frequently met under the auspices of a local branch of the South African Council of Churches to pastorally plan and coordinate our Christian witness on the streets, in order to keep pace with our fast-changing environment. Christian presence is so important in all situations of conflict even today.

During apartheid, especially in its final years when the system was unbundling and generally falling apart on the streets of South Africa the ministry of pastoral presence took on a new meaning. Ministers and priests constantly gathered community leaders together for crisis consultations, interpreting events daily with the people, organising community funerals after massacres and police killings, actively monitoring arrests, supporting treason trialists and generally being a public sign of hope and a “shepherding” presence in the streets.

Monitoring and “mentoring” society from our Christian perspective drew church people into a deeper spiritual togetherness, which has endured to this today.

Pope Francis vividly describes this ministry thus. “What is necessary is *proximity*: to embrace, kiss, touch, hug a son or a daughter. When the Church neglects this proximity, it is like a mother who communicates with her son (only) in a letter” Clearly this does not apply during the Corona virus period. But new forms of radical ministry do apply; and are called for.

Thirdly, we engaged in a *ministry of solidarity* with the poor and oppressed. They knew we were there for them. They and their leaders knew that when the government banned their meetings in schools and municipal halls that the church premises would be available. This was cutting-edge ministry.

Fourthly, we had a *ministry of intervention* which was a kind of ‘clerical task force’, on call twenty-four hours a day to intervene anywhere and at any time. We were called upon during riots, in clashes between police and people, as a compassionate and symbolic presence after sudden massacres, for hospital visitation of the injured and wounded.

There was also a more subtle priestly ministry. That of convincing people that freedom, yes, freedom, was *possible* and that the present turmoil might be ultimately connected to it.

It implied a *ministry of postulating a new order*, in our case ‘regime change’ – at a time when no one dared think that far ahead. A feature of this ministry was that of guiding resistance and dissent into active non-violent action and passive resistance.

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It was a ministry of not just witnessing but opening the door to the beginning of the end of apartheid. As pastors and priests we knew that this was the ultimate peace-building solution for our country, based on John 10:10: ‘I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full.’

Finally, as black and white clergy involved in a rolling black uprising, *our united* public presence and ministry at key moments and places was in itself a powerful sign of present and future racial reconciliation. A *ministry of reconciliation*. I remain convinced that the common pastoral decisions, actions and liturgies we undertook in the 'eighties saved our townships, and the nation, from the bloodbath anticipated by the world media at the time of the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994.

In all of this the word ‘ecumenism’ wasn’t mentioned. I said this above. Some churchmen or women didn’t even know what the word meant. And they didn’t care. They didn’t come together because their church leaders told them to; they came together out of human necessity. Out of terrible need. Fighting the common enemy, apartheid, was enough to bring the churches out onto the streets. It became a *living* ecumenism. A *ministry of ecumenism*. We were united by a sense of compassion and concern for the excluded. We were united by faith, life and action. We were united by our opposition to sin, the sin of division, the sin of separateness. We were united by the spirit of Christ, who still crosses pastoral boundaries in his compassion for the underdog, the broken-hearted, the sick, the outsiders and the sinners.

It has been estimated that by 2025 most Christians will be living in the southern hemisphere and will be starting to determine the future of Christianity. Perhaps it is from there too that future ecumenism and interfaith dialogue will find *new* hope and *new* creative impetus.

Sixty million people in South Africa have never forgotten the *prophetic* role of the churches in their time of need. *Today* religious and laity are dying on the front lines of the Corona virus pandemic. They are the martyrs and saints of the future. They have taken the Maximilian Kolbe option to die so that others may live. Truly may they rest in peace.

The world awaits further daring Christian responses to the Corona virus because now we are “*doing theology at the coalface of experience*” (Redemptorist Bishop Kevin Dowling of South Africa). That makes a huge difference.