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Pastoral Care and Counselling: Towards a Post-Metaphysical Theology of Friendship

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Abstract: The article sets out to develop an eschatological ethic of friendship to guide pastoral care and counselling towards a liberating practice. It uses post-metaphysical categories and terms from the ethical metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas to enrich pastoral theology. The aim is to stretch compassion towards the future world of Isa 64: 4 and 1 Cor 2:9 in which we can announce a logos of friendship. By having such a sense of transcendence (an experience of a non-experience), compassion as friendship testifies to the Reign of God and to the very hope of encountering Christ in one another.

The power to heal, sustain, guide, reconcile and nurture has been at the heart and centre of pastoral care and counselling. We know from the Gospels and writers like Henri Nouwen¹ that we can heal with faith and the wounds of loneliness. In crises, we can sustain people with care and consolation. Further, we can guide with spiritual direction and counselling. Towards touching the Infinite in faith, we can reconcile with hope, forgiveness, justice and mercy. Finally, we can nurture people with education and training. But this is not the last word. Becoming a shepherd for people, a person who witnesses to Christ's life in deed and word, remains an enigma. It is an enigma because the Word of God is a discourse ultimately beyond the drama of our life and senses. It is not easy becoming a shepherd in this sense. Too often we live within our crooked lives and bent ways seeking our own experiences for personal salvation. We have journeyed so fast that we have missed the time to encounter the face of our neighbour. Even as pastoral carers and counsellors, we can often be inhibited by models, principles and practices of pastoral care that keep us safe within worlds of empathy, but being reluctant to enter into pathways of compassion.

If we dare to live out a natural disposition of compassion that swells out of our body, mind, heart and spirit, then our being-in-the-world must extend itself to a being-in-the-world-*for-others*. Admittedly, this is a difficult freedom for it is much easier not to be friends with our neighbour than it is to be friends with him or her. This is even more the case with God. We can know this because to be friends with God is very demanding as John the Baptist states, "He must increase, but I must decrease". Furthermore, none of the disciples would dare to call Jesus his friend until the Last Supper. It is Jesus who dares to do the initiating: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made

¹ See Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972); and Henri Nouwen, *The Living Reminder* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982).

known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15:15).² Accordingly, in a like manner, we must also do some initiating. The world of the poor one in distress, hunger and pain is an overwhelming one which many refuse to envisage and taste. None the less, given the possibility that we can let ourselves be encountered by the poor one’s loneliness, fear and suffering, we could well imagine the very possibility of friendship and hence, an encounter with God. We are called and we are charged to make known what God the Father has proclaimed through his Son and Spirit, namely the liberation of humanity, a very be-attitude of friendship.

From a Messianic Era to a Future World

I want to begin a discussion about a theology of friendship that finds its roots more in an eschatological future world (Isa. 64:4; 1 Cor 2:9) rather than economics, politics or utopia. In addition, I wish to avoid any dogmatic and praxis-laden claims to truth especially based upon idolising experience, objective knowledge, totalising ideals and suspicious fears. The poor and the suffering are not ‘objects’ of knowledge and nor are they ‘objects’ of mission. Before all thinking and consciousness, everyone has a face. It is particularly in friendship that the true and beautiful faces come to mind.

What is this eschatological future world? Isa 64: 4 and 1 Cor 2:9 explore in a like manner this notion:

From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him (Isa. 64:4).

But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Cor 2:9).

There are also two very interesting ancient Jewish Talmudic texts (from *Sanhedrin 99a*) that offer a taste of what this future world refers:

R. Hiyaa b. Abba said in R. Johanan’s name: All the prophets prophesied [all the good things] only in respect of the messianic era; but as for the world to come, ‘*the eye hath not seen, O Lord, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him*’.

R. Joshua b. Levi said: To the wine that has been kept [maturing] with its grapes since the six days of Creation. A famous vintage! An ancient wine that had not been bottled, or even harvested. A wine not given the least opportunity to become adulterated. Absolutely unaltered,

² Medard Kehl and Werner Löser (eds), *The von Balthasar Reader*, translated by Robert J. Daly SJ and Fred Lawrence (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982), 209.

absolutely pure. The future world is this wine. Let us admire the beauty of the image, but none the less question the meaning it might have.³

These texts have been quoted by Emmanuel Levinas, a French-Jewish philosopher and Talmudic scholar, whose writings in recent decades have inspired Christian theology to focus on ethical metaphysical categories as opposed to Heideggerian ontology and phenomenology. Looking at the first Talmudic text, there is an important distinction between the messianic era and the future world. A messianic era begins with humanity using its moral and/or spiritual power to resolve political, social and economic problems. It is a return to the good after experiencing the dramatic excess of evil, where, for example, repentant sinners have a greater perfection than the completely righteous.⁴ As a result, we have a vision of an era in which we remain steadfast and vigilant against a history of hatred and evil being reborn in the present.

The Future World and Experience

The eschatological future world, on the other hand, refers to an imagination beyond both history and the present time. It is a reality that flows over into an immemorial time of transcendence, that is, to the very time or non-time! of God. Again we can taste such a time through adoring its beauty and glory whilst at the same moment searching for its truth. Rabbi Johsua ben Levi imagines theologically that this future world is like partaking of the grape, an ancient wine in the garden of Eden that has been maturing since the days of Creation. To drink of this future world is, according to Levinas, to transcend the contamination/adulteration of interpretation.

In theology, we are constantly searching for the logos, for rational ways of speaking of God. However, usually our discourse of reason often falls into confusion and a self-certainty that often again falls into irrationality. One way to develop a theology of friendship is to look at Christ's archetypal experience of faith and of being human. We can appreciate that Christ's experience of humanity was so profound that it surpassed our everyday experience which for the most part is self-interested and unthinking. However, developing a theology of friendship is challenging as complex categories must be employed to perceive Christ's archetypal experience. Once the language has been set out, we can then begin the task of applying it to pastoral care and counselling. Yet we

³ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 60, 66.

⁴ Looking at the Messianic Era, Levinas quotes Rabbi Abbahu, speaking in Rav's name: "The place occupied by repentant sinners cannot be attained even by the completely righteous". Levinas, then, compares this with Christianity (Matthew 20:1-16) and Dostoyevsky: "Is not the labourer hired at the eleventh hour the most interesting one? Repentance is worth more than an uninterrupted existence spent in good, or boring, fidelity". See Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 64-65.

must be aware that developing any theology must take a path of humility, and an openness to the Spirit and others to respond, encourage and/or challenge.

Developing a Theology of Friendship: a post-metaphysical vision of pastoral care and counselling

Levinas' ethical metaphysics provides a variety of terms and profound insights to help to construct a theology of friendship. It is of especial significance as it tries to resist the contamination of onto-theology, that is, the proof and explanation of the word of God in terms of being and objectivity. Nevertheless, using an ethical metaphysical language that prioritises ethics as first theology and first philosophy will always have the danger of falling back into ontological language. But it is a risk worth taking so that we can traverse the limits of ontology and thereby, articulate a theology in which ethical behaviour and language coincide.

A possible starting point to set the context for a post-metaphysical theology of friendship is to enter the world of the Risen Christ's consciousness. Up until the Resurrection, the disciples experienced Jesus with their sense experience (primarily seeing, hearing and touching) and emotions. It continued through journeying with Christ and learning along the paschal way. However, in the Resurrection, the disciples experienced a collision between knowing Jesus as their friend who has died and having faith in their friend who has risen from the dead. In the Gospel of John (20:19-23) we read:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

We can perhaps perceive that with the reception of the Spirit, the disciples' eyes and ears were opened to the non-phenomenal or transcendent world of Christ's mission-consciousness. They are empowered to forgive and to retain sins. We have seen from the understanding of the distinction between the messianic era and the eschatological future world that repentance lies between both worlds. The repentant sinner has not only achieved a place in the messianic era of seeking the good in the midst of political, economic and social oppression, but also the possibility of entering a future world and thus attaining a vision of, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). Jesus has effectively given

to the disciples an in-spirited gift of leading repentant sinners towards a future world of glory and eternity.

We too experience a collision between our sense experiences (including our imagination and corresponding emotions) in regards to Jesus as a God-man who came to be with us and who is now ascended into heaven. But like the disciples who encounter the Risen Christ, we too are challenged to go beyond our everyday consciousness and experiences of life to what is beyond, namely to the good world of the moral conscience and corresponding transcendent emotions (like desire and fear for the other). We may call this realm one of uttermost passivity and openness, an encounter or in enigmatic terms, an ‘experience of a non-experience’.

We must now move on to bringing out new categories to develop a theology of friendship and hence ‘to see beyond seeing’ and ‘to hear beyond hearing’ the encounter with the other in pastoral care and counselling. Using Levinas’ philosophy, in the first column of the table below, I have developed the following seven categories or modalities of (ethical/eschatological) transcendence: fear, fission, trauma, anarchy, diachrony, persecution and exposure. The second column develops their meaning further. Finally, in the third column, I transpose the seven transcendent categories in pastoral theological terms: compassion, the ethics of prayer, conversion (repentance), the encounter with mystery, the proximity of being-for-the-other, suffering/expiation and friendship. My aim is to suggest a post-metaphysical vision of pastoral care and counselling that ultimately must take the form of friendship.

Category/Modality of Ethical/ Eschatological Transcendence	Ultimate, Original Meaning → Truth	Application to Pastoral Care and Counselling
<i>Fear</i>	Fear is primarily <i>my</i> fear for the other’s death, suffering, loneliness and forsakenness.	Compassion
<i>Fission</i>	The encounter of God’s inward voice calling forth the self’s responsibility for the Other.	The Ethics of Prayer

<i>Trauma</i>	Fission produces a trauma because of the overwhelming surprise in which God's inward voice comes to mind.	Conversion (repentance)
<i>Anarchy</i>	<p>Anarchy refers to God's time of eternity without origin. It is the "In" of "In the beginning" (Gen 1:1; Jn 1:1), that is, an immemorial time (of a past that can never be present).</p> <p>From a time beyond our own, beyond representation, explanations, proofs and an all manner of sense experiences, God's inner word and voice comes from a past without origin and at most can be encountered as a trace within our own time. This suggests that we are always late to listen to God's call.</p>	Encounter with Mystery
<i>Diachrony</i>	<p>Diachrony refers to God's time of entering the present and of our coming to responsibility through the events/goodness of our lives. In a practical sense, it can take our whole life to learn how to be good and loving.</p> <p>Furthermore, the original divine address is marked by diachrony, that is, a past never present to experience (sense experience and everyday emotions) and Being (our reality and everyday existence). Accordingly, the past might only be signified by way of ethical transcendence, namely a life that is an image and likeness of Christ's incarnate life. This suggests that the encounter with the word of God is a trace; again we have been late to listen to the word of God.</p>	Proximity, being-for-the-other
<i>Persecution</i>	A certain persecution is entailed, as that the self might awaken to (the diachrony) of transcendence, as egoistic consciousness is inverted to become a moral conscience. The self is subject to a unique form of affliction when it begins to bear the faults of others.	Suffering/ Expiation

<i>Exposure</i>	Exposure signifies a desire for the other. Such desire leads the self on to a condition of utter passivity to the extent of becoming an other (<i>superindividuation</i>) and therefore in such exposure, bleeding/haemorrhaging for and with him/her. It is a life of mercy, justice and peace, encountering and testifying to the Reign of God is the hope of glory: a life of being exposed to Christ and to the Other in Christ (the face of the Other), that is to say, a Eucharistic life.	Friendship
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Using the two further notions of the messianic era and the eschatological future world, we can categorise together (in the table below) the Levinasian modalities of fear, fission, trauma, anarchy, diachrony, persecution and exposure with the pastoral theological categories of compassion, the ethics of prayer, conversion (repentance), the encounter with mystery, the proximity of being-for-the-other, suffering/expiation and friendship:

Messianic Era	Future Word
<i>Fear, Compassion</i>	<i>Trauma, Conversion (Repentance)</i>
<i>Fission, The Ethics of Prayer</i>	<i>Anarchy, Encounter with Mystery</i>
<i>Trauma, Conversion (Repentance)</i>	<i>Diachrony, the Proximity of Being-For – The-Other</i>
	<i>Persecution, Suffering/Expiation</i>
	<i>Exposure, Friendship</i>

The two tables above provide a summary and act as a guide and reference point for articulating a post-metaphysical theology of friendship in the context of pastoral care and counselling. It is a complex task to speak of friendship in the realm of transcendence or ‘the experience of a non-experience’. Nevertheless, there is a need today to ground pastoral theology in eschatology and phenomenology, and hence to make it more profoundly relevant to the disciples’ encounter of the Risen Christ and his Spirit. In the following, I will limit my discussion to compassion and friendship. For my reflection on the other eschatological practices, namely, the ethics of prayer, conversion (repentance), the encounter with mystery, the proximity of being-for-the-other, suffering/expiation, I suggest having a look at the full publication of this conference paper in next

year's ACU EJournal of Theology. In regards to my reflection of compassion and friendship, I will also speak of the messianic era and/or the future world. Let us first look at compassion.

Compassion

In pastoral theology, empathy is often emphasised as an important quality. It is something which many pastoral carers and counsellors can develop and nurture. But the problem with empathy, the experience of another person's experience, is that it can often be reduced to a cold judgement of the other person's state of being or welfare. The question remains whether empathy is sufficient enough to be helpful. I think that empathy is very necessary and a sign of one's freedom to take on responsibility for another's welfare. However, empathy is very much a part of our everyday life. But in a messianic era in which grave responsibilities lie to bring an end to economic, social and political sufferings, we need a passion to engage the heart and mind together so that it may bear forth hope and a maturity for doing what is seemingly impossible in an age of greed, war and oppression, namely bringing peace, mercy and friendship to people's lives.

I want to argue that compassion begins when our own fears become a fear for the other's death, suffering, loneliness and forsakenness. Death, suffering, loneliness and being forsaken no longer have the character of being "mine," but are in fact encounters that teach us an ethic of otherness. We can begin to be conscious of things in life the more we learn to go beyond the limitations of our own personal needs and fears. In fact, we can find the truth of our personal needs and fears when we invert them by taking responsibility for the other's needs and fears. But in order to do this, we must be resolute to the point of hyper-vigilance and hyper-sensitivity to let ourselves be encountered by another's fear of suffering and death. This suggests a determination to let our hearts be wounded by the other and so become an integral part of the passion of their lives. More than getting into another's shoes (empathy), compassion is getting into another's skin - a disposition of vulnerability and of truly suffering with and for the other.

Friendship

Friendship involves having a profound sense of compassion or a eucharistic practice of love (a life of being exposed to Christ and to the other in Christ (the face of the other)). Moreover, it is a very state of 'being gifted'. Let us look at the idea of 'being gifted' in the space and time of Christ's passion. I suggest that to be gifted is not the experience itself of having one's nature perfected, but

to be anarchically affected by the trauma of God's order to Christ and the world to be responsible. Let us now extend such a conception to the context of the eucharist.

In the language of alterity, we could say that the eucharist signifies that an order of responsibility has been made through the time of Christ's death, going to the dead and Resurrection. This is a time beyond the experience of having one's nature perfected. We can say then that eucharistic grace perfects the possibility of expiating like Christ for the other. But such grace demands a difficult condition. For, it is the eucharist that surprises the self absolutely with the trauma of Christ's expiation. Such trauma inspires devotion to the other's hunger for the body and blood of Christ, a hunger namely for salvation, justice and mercy. Hence in the eucharist, it is not my hunger for Christ that matters, but the other's hunger to such a point where *my* hunger is the other's hunger. We can thus begin to imagine how the eucharist is a site of ethical transcendence in which the self is gifted with the likeness of Christ's incarnate life.

Eucharistic living deepens and clarifies not the perfection of *my* nature, but the perfection of *my* expiation for others. The self is therefore first a passivity to the other's hunger. Further, we can conceive that the eucharist ruptures the experience of one's nature as perfect. Or, in other words, just as Christ cannot deny humanity with responsibility, so the eucharist deepens and clarifies the self's ethical responsibility. Hence, the eucharistic self exists through and for the other to a point where such passivity coincides with expiation.

Expiation is a difficult condition, but I want to argue that it is a condition *par excellence* that gives rise to a theology of friendship. This is to say that the salvific encounter of Christ's suffering, death and rising to new life cannot be reduced to an essence or reality or even a meaning in consciousness, but rather it can be discovered in eschatological existence. Hence, when theology rises above experience and essence, it might just cut through objectivity and articulate the word "God" in the space and time of the future world of Isa 64: 4 and 1 Cor 2:9.

Conclusion: Friendship, Pastoral Care and Counselling

Developing a post-metaphysical theology of friendship and a preliminary one at that is complex, especially when Levinasian categories and terms are employed. The vision for pastoral theology must never remain static, but be a living reminder of the Incarnation, paschal mystery and Trinity. There is much in Levinas' ethical metaphysics to enhance the vision and imagination of Christian

theology. Levinas' thinking should not just be narrowly limited to fundamental theology,⁵ for example, but opened up to the many areas of theology. Even there is much room to develop many of the Levinasian categories and terms to other areas like psychosis, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.⁶ However my major overriding emphasis in this article has been the very grave responsibility of friendship. I want to show that friendship, as an eschatological ethic gives rise to the possibility of pastoral care and counselling in the future world of Isa 64: 4 and 1 Cor 2:9. Accordingly, if we want to be like the disciples, called to a life of *superindividuation* (expiation), then we have to allow our compassionate lives to be deepened by friendship. Justice, then, could be made glorious with mercy and hope, and hence, the good love of friendship can be deepened by truth and beauty.

People engaged in pastoral care and counselling have a responsibility to proclaim and witness to the Reign of God. But carers and counsellors should not be content (or be subservient to intense emotions) to just focus on social, economic and political problems. As people of faith, pastoral carers and counsellors must seek to bring their ministry up a notch to the future world rather than the temptations of one's own personal world of self-interest and care-for-oneself (caring and fearing only for one's own death and possibilities). When our lives are truly rooted in the glory of God's love and an eschatological ethic of testifying to it, we have then the wisdom to engage the world's economic, social and political problems with an agapic and ethical love and existence of friendship.

God has indeed prepared an ancient vintage *for us*. It has been maturing since an immemorial time, a time beyond memory. The more we become Christ-like and hence, in desire to share the Good News of the Reign of God (Luke 16:16), we can realise that the Reign of God is among us (Luke 17:21). Pastoral carers and counsellors are, by virtue of their vocation and profession, called to a life of compassionate service even to the point of expiation. The giving of pastoral care and counselling is demanding as it mediates the world of the Spirit and faith to the sufferings and joys of people's lives. Compassion itself is an outpouring of mercy; it shows how one has begun to journey into another's life. But, with friendship we have something that ruptures and stretches compassion with the demands of the beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12). We might call this a eucharistic love. In friendship with the other, pastoral carers and counsellors are chosen to witness to what no eye has seen nor ear heard nor heart conceived, namely the hope of glory to encounter Christ in one another (Col 1:27).

⁵ This is the position of Michael Purcell, a Levinasian scholar and theologian of the University of Edinburgh. See his article "Levinas and Theology?: The scope and limits of doing theology with Levinas", *The Heythrop Journal* 44:4 (October, 2003), 468-479.

⁶ See, for example, my forthcoming article in May, 2007 in *The Heythrop Journal*, entitled, "Phenomenology, Theology and Psychosis: Towards Compassion".