

CLERGY WELL-BEING

RECONCILIATION

The section of the Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy which is headed “Reconciliation” deals for the most part with the Ministry of Reconciliation in the sacrament generally known as Confession. It speaks of the vital importance of confidentiality both in that ministry, “The Seal of the Confessional”, and in the wider field of pastoral care. It also addresses the issue of abuse.

Some clergy hear confessions regularly and often, while others will not. There is no canonical obligation to make sacramental confession in the Church of England, so the majority of those who come to confession do so as part of their rule of life, as a means of grace for their growth in discipleship and holiness. There are, however, occasions when people who are in a moral or spiritual crisis do turn to a priest seeking forgiveness. Clergy need to know what to do on such occasions so as to be able to minister effectively to those who may be in spiritual distress.

All clergy who minister to people in need must recognize the importance not only of pastoral competence, but of their own spiritual life and discipline. As well as those spiritual practices which feed our Christian life, priests need those of self-examination, self-awareness and repentance. These may seem negative to some but they are essential in the exercise of ministry. Neglect of them undermines both the ability to minister and the spiritual wholeness, health or well-being, of those who minister. Practices of regular prayer, retreat and spiritual guidance are more than aids to competence. They contribute the well-being and staying-power of those in ministry. .

There is here a responsibility both on the individual to make use of these spiritual resources and on the Church to ensure that they are available.

Clergy may find themselves called to exercise a ministry of reconciliation in situations of conflict among parishioners, within families, between neighbours. The resolution of such conflicts requires wisdom and patience, self-awareness and resilience. Again there would seem to be a responsibility placed on both minister and Church.

This is even more pressing when clergy find themselves in conflict with either parishioners, local residents or fellow-clergy. There is a widespread sense that the Clergy Discipline Measure encourages the escalation of complaints, placing clergy under added stress. However, not all complaints are unjustified and clergy do need to be conscious of the limitations of their authority and work within them.

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