

# The Model of Pastoral Ministry for Priests in the Light of the Document *Evangelii Gaudium*

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## Abstract:

In the document *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasises that the Church today faces serious challenges from secular culture, including consumerism, materialism, and individualism. These cultural dynamics pose significant obstacles to the realisation of authentic pastoral ministry. This article focuses on the ministry of priests within this context, particularly in urban settings in Indonesia, where such challenges are increasingly evident. In practice, some priests are confronted with temptations influenced by secular values, such as attachment to comfort zones, the pursuit of recognition, and a tendency toward a more luxurious, less missionary lifestyle. This study aims to propose a model of pastoral ministry, inspired by *Evangelii Gaudium*, that responds to contemporary challenges. Employing a qualitative approach through literature review and theological reflection, the study analyses key themes in the document in dialogue with biblical texts, especially the Gospels. The findings highlight three essential forms of pastoral ministry: a ministry that goes beyond the comfort zone, a compassionate ministry rooted in mercy, and a dialogical ministry grounded in listening and participation. These models are expected to provide a relevant, contextual framework for priests to carry out their mission more authentically and effectively. Ultimately, this study contributes to the renewal of pastoral ministry by integrating theological foundations with the concrete realities faced by priests in today's world.

**Keywords:** Church; comfort zone; compassionate; dialogical; *Evangelii Gaudium*; Pastoral Ministry; Priests.

## INTRODUCTION

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis stated in a pastoral yet prophetic tone that the contemporary world is experiencing a silent spiritual crisis that penetrates to the deepest recesses of human consciousness (Chrzanowski, 2024). As a result, spiritual life is experiencing a drought; the joy of the Gospel is replaced by endless anxiety; social relations are reduced to calculations of interests; and conscience, which should be a space for encounter with God, is instead muffled by the roar of the desire for possession and the desire for recognition. Pope Francis called this phenomenon one of the most serious threats to the Christian faith, because when the heart is dominated by the logic of consumption, humans gradually lose the capacity for compassion and to hear God's voice in history (Fransiskus, 2013).

This phenomenon is not a theoretical abstraction. It is a reality in everyday life, including in ecclesiastical spaces. The church, as a community of believers, does not exist in a vacuum; it exists amidst social dynamics fraught with the temptations of pragmatism and power. Globalization, with all its technological tools, has accelerated the circulation of values and lifestyles, making the boundaries between the sacred and the profane increasingly blurred (Lazariuc, 2025). In the Indonesian context, particularly in large cities experiencing

accelerated urbanization, the currents of secularization and popular culture have created a new mentality that tends to judge everything based on efficiency, popularity, and symbolic gain. In such a situation, pastoral ministers are not immune to the influences of the times. They also face the temptation to organize their services based solely on managerial logic, prioritizing the comfort of facilities, considering financial stability, or even seeking subtle but alluring social recognition.

Criticism of this trend has been voiced in various church forums. Pope Francis, on several occasions, has emphatically warned clergy against falling into the trap of a worldly mentality that undermines the integrity of their priestly vocation. He emphasized that priests are called to present the humble and compassionate face of Christ, not to be spiritual bureaucrats distanced from the suffering of the people (Fransiskus, 2014). A similar tone is also evident in the pastoral reflections of theologians and church practitioners in Indonesia, who highlight the dangers of liturgical formalism and elitist tendencies in ministry (Hendrianto, 2022). This critique demonstrates that the issues raised are not merely normative discourse, but realities that demand theological reflection and practical transformation.

Theologically, the ministerial priesthood is firmly grounded in Church teaching. The Second Vatican Council affirmed that priests, through ordination, are specifically included in the priesthood of Christ and called to serve the people of God in preaching, celebrating the sacraments, and shepherding (Konsili Vatikan II, 1965). They act in *persona Christi*, not as representatives of worldly power, but as signs of the presence of Christ the Good Shepherd who gave himself for his sheep. The Catechism of the Catholic Church adds that this ministry is essentially a participation in Christ's saving mission. Thus, priestly identity cannot be separated from the dimensions of sacrifice, solidarity, and love grounded in the concrete history of the people (Grimell, 2025).

However, this is where tensions arise between theological ideals and practical realities. On the one hand, the Church possesses a rich doctrinal treasure regarding the nature and purpose of pastoral ministry. On the other hand, contemporary social dynamics give rise to patterns of ministry that do not always align with the missionary spirit emphasized in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Pope Francis invites the entire Church to be a Church that goes out, daring to leave its comfort zone and encounter those marginalized on the peripheries (Fransiskus, 2013). However, a number of recent pastoral studies and reflections indicate that the transformation toward a truly missionary Church still faces structural and cultural resistance (Tornielli, 2016).

In the academic context, numerous studies have been conducted on priestly pastoral care, from the perspectives of systematic theology, ecclesiology, and practical pastoral studies (Santana et al., 2025). These studies generally highlight aspects of priestly identity, spirituality, and the dynamics of ecclesiastical leadership. However, a significant research gap exists when narrowing the focus to models of priestly pastoral care explicitly read and analyzed in light of *Evangelii Gaudium* as the primary hermeneutical paradigm. Many studies still use this document as a sporadically cited normative reference, not as a comprehensive conceptual framework for reconstructing models of pastoral care. Furthermore, contextual studies in Indonesia linking Pope Francis' critique of clericalism and worldly culture with the concrete realities of priestly service in urban parishes are still relatively limited (Lee-Niinioja, 2022).

This research gap becomes even more relevant when we consider that *Evangelii Gaudium* is not merely a programmatic document, but rather the pastoral magna charta of Francis' papacy, reorienting the Church's mission in the twenty-first century. This document places the joy of the Gospel at the center, and from there flows a critique of the structures and mentalities that hinder its proclamation. Without a thorough and contextual reading of this document, pastoral ministry risks becoming trapped in an administrative routine that loses its transformative power. Therefore, research is needed that not only explains the teachings of *Evangelii Gaudium* but also interprets and constructs a concrete, contextual, and relevant model of pastoral ministry for priests for the Indonesian Church today.

Based on this background, this research has several main objectives. *First*, critically analyzes the theological points in *Evangelii Gaudium* related to the identity and mission of priestly pastoral ministry. This analysis will explore the dimensions of missionary spirituality, compassion, and pro-poor care as the foundation of the model of ministry desired by Pope Francis. *Second*, reflects the reality of priestly pastoral ministry in the Indonesian context, particularly the challenges of secularization, popularity culture, and the tendency towards formalism, using *Evangelii Gaudium* as a hermeneutical lens. *Third*, formulating an integrative model of pastoral service for priests, which is faithful to the traditions of the Church and at the same time responsive to the dynamics of the times.

Thus, this research is not merely descriptive, but also constructive and normative. It seeks to bridge the gap between text and context, between theological ideals and pastoral practice. In the spirit of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the proposed model of pastoral ministry reaffirms that priests are called not to seek personal stability, but to bear

witness to the luminous joy of the Gospel in a fragile world. Only by returning to the spirituality of encounter and the courage to go beyond oneself can pastoral ministry become an authentic sign of hope for the people of God. Through this research, it is hoped that an academic contribution will be born that will enrich the discourse on pastoral theology in Indonesia while offering a practical orientation for priests in living out their vocation more deeply, authentically, and prophetically in the midst of a changing era.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method with a literature review approach. This methodological choice is based on the nature of the problem under study, namely, a theological reflection on the pastoral care model of priests in light of the Church's magisterial documents. The research is not oriented toward collecting empirical field data, but rather toward a critical and interpretive reading of normative texts and relevant theological literature. Within the tradition of theological research, a text-based qualitative approach enables researchers to deeply and comprehensively uncover the meanings, ideas, and spiritual horizons contained in Church documents (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021).

The primary source for this research is Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. This document is systematically analyzed by exploring key themes related to priestly identity, missionary spirituality, the critique of clericalism, and the Church's call to be an outward and merciful community. The analysis is conducted through a theological hermeneutical reading, namely by understanding the text within its magisterial context as well as within the dynamics of the contemporary Church (Fransiskus, 2013).

In addition, this research also utilizes other Church documents as a conceptual framework and theological confirmation. Among these are documents from the Second Vatican Council, such as *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Lumen Gentium*, which provide a doctrinal foundation regarding the nature and mission of priests in the Church (Konsili Vatikan II, 1964). Scripture is used as a biblical foundation, especially texts that present Christ as the Good and merciful Shepherd, a paradigm for pastoral ministry throughout Church history.

In addition to magisterial documents and Scripture, this study also draws on contemporary pastoral theology literature to enrich the analysis and reconcile norms with practice (Tornielli, 2016). This literature helps map the dynamics of pastoral ministry today, including the challenges of secularization and the crisis of spirituality in the global and Indonesian contexts (Taucher, 2015). Thus, the sources used do not stand alone but rather dialogue with each other within a holistic theological reflection framework.

The analytical technique used is theological content analysis with a reflective-critical approach. The author first identifies central ideas in the text and then groups them into thematic categories relevant to priestly pastoral ministry. Next, a process of critical reflection is undertaken by linking these textual findings to the concrete realities of contemporary pastoral ministry. This approach aligns with the pastoral theology method, which emphasizes the dynamics of seeing, assessing, and acting as a process of faith-based reflection on historical reality (Bevans, 2022).

Through this reflective theological-pastoral approach, the research does not stop at normative descriptions, but moves toward constructive conceptual formulations. The model of pastoral care formulated is the result of a synthesis of magisterial teachings, theological reflection, and a critical reading of the context. Thus, the method used allows for the birth of a model that is both faithful to the Church's tradition and responsive to the challenges of the times, thus having practical relevance for priests in living out their pastoral vocation more authentically and missionarily.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Theological Framework of Pastoral Ministry

Pastoral ministry is essentially the living, moving pulse of the Church amidst human history. It is not merely an organizational activity or a periodically arranged work program, but rather a concrete participation in God's saving mission, culminating in Jesus Christ (Magezi & Nanthambwe, 2022). In the light of Catholic faith, the Church exists not for itself, but as a sacrament of salvation, a sign and means of humanity's communion with God and the unity of all humanity. Christ himself came into the world to proclaim the Kingdom of God as a reality of salvation that frees humanity from the bondage of sin and restores the broken relationship between creation and Creator (Dunlop, 1962). This proclamation does not stop with the word, but is incarnated in actions that heal, forgive, and restore the dignity of those who have been marginalized. Through His cross and

resurrection, He opened new horizons for history, so that salvation is no longer a distant eschatological discourse, but a concrete experience that transcends time and space.

This sense of mission finds expression in the apostles' mission. After His resurrection, Christ did not leave the disciples confined in fear, but breathed the Spirit and sent them as He Himself was sent by the Father (Macchia, 2023). This event marked the birth of the Church as a sent community. The mandate to make disciples of all nations has been the foundation of the Church's missionary dynamics throughout the ages. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles proclaimed the Gospel to the borders of the world, and this proclamation has been passed down through the generations through the living apostolic tradition of the Church. In the context of contemporary theology, this mission is understood as participation in the *missio Dei*, the ongoing work of God himself in history (Bevans, 2022). Thus, pastoral care cannot be separated from the divine and historical dimensions of mission.

The Second Vatican Council deepened this awareness by affirming that all God's people are called to participate in the Church's mission. The document *Apostolicam Actuositatem* emphasized that the apostolate is not the monopoly of any particular group, but rather the shared responsibility of all members of the Church (Popović, 2025). Through the sacrament of baptism, every member of the faithful is incorporated into the Body of Christ and shares in His priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions. This teaching affirms the Church's participatory dimension, where Christian identity is always linked to the call to serve and proclaim. Recent ecclesiological reflection emphasizes that awareness of the common priesthood of the faithful is the foundation for a more synodal and participatory pastoral renewal (R. C. O'Malley et al., 2021). Thus, pastoral ministry is born of the grace of baptism, which calls everyone to be a witness to the Gospel in the world.

From this general participation, more specific and organized forms of ministry emerge, tailored to the needs of the local Church. Pastoral ministers are those who consciously participate in the task of guiding, accompanying, and strengthening the faithful in their journey of faith. The diversity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit enriches the dynamics of this ministry, allowing each person to serve according to their talents and the calling they have received (Vondey, 2024). This principle aligns with the reflection of charism theology, which views the Church as a community built by the diverse gifts of the Spirit (Congar, 2020). Thus, pastoral ministry is not simply the distribution of administrative functions, but a concrete manifestation of grace at work within the body of the Church.

Pastoral ministry consists of clergy and laity, who share the same dignity as children of God, but differ in their positions and responsibilities. This distinction does not indicate a hierarchy of values, but rather a differentiation of roles within the unity of the body of Christ. For clergy, ministry is marked by the reception of the sacrament of Holy Orders, which comprises the diaconate, presbyterate, and episcopate. These sacraments provide special grace to act on behalf of Christ in the tasks of sanctification, teaching, and shepherding. Meanwhile, the laity, through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, are called to bring the values of the Gospel into earthly reality, becoming leaven that sanctifies the world from within (van der Watt, 2023). The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that baptism elevates people to the people of God and calls them to take an active part in the Church's mission.

In this paper, attention is focused specifically on the priest as a pastoral minister. The identity of a priest is rooted in the sacrament of Holy Orders, which marks an ontological configuration with Christ the Shepherd. Ordination is not simply a functional assignment, but rather a profound participation in Christ's unique and eternal priesthood. Through the reception of this sacrament, the priest is called to sanctify the people of God, especially through the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of the Church's life. He is also commissioned to proclaim the Word with prophetic fidelity and courage, and to lead the community in a spirit of service. Contemporary reflections on the theology of the priesthood emphasize that the identity of the priest must be understood in relation to the people of God, not apart from them (Greshake, 2021).

In carrying out his duties, the priest acts in *persona Christi*. This expression carries profound theological significance because it refers to the sacramental presence of Christ himself in the actions of the Church. However, this presence should not be understood as legitimizing authoritarian power. Rather, it demands participation in Christ's humble and compassionate lifestyle. The words of Christ that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve become the hermeneutical norm for all priestly ministry (Cho, 2024). A spirituality of service rooted in self-sacrifice affirms that authority in the Church is always directed toward liberating love (Rowlands, 2022). Thus, priestly power finds its meaning precisely in humility and a willingness to give oneself for the salvation of many.

The image of Christ as the Good Shepherd has become an irreplaceable paradigm within the theological

framework of pastoral care. A shepherd knows his sheep and is willing to lay down his life for them (Robinson, 2024a). This metaphor is not merely poetic but also carries a profound relational dimension. Priests are called to be a concrete presence in the lives of the People of God, understanding their struggles and accompanying them in the realities of daily life. Such a presence demands genuine closeness, not bureaucratic distance. Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized the importance of priests being close to the people and not isolated in institutional comforts (Fransiskus, 2020). This closeness fosters a pastoral sensitivity that enables ministry to be relevant and address the concrete needs of the people.

Today's global challenges demand that priests be critical and reflective. Globalization, secularization, and the development of digital technology present new realities that influence how the faithful understand faith and the Church (Naibaho et al., 2024). Priests cannot remain confined to static and repetitive pastoral patterns. They are called to read the signs of the times with spiritual wisdom, thus enabling them to formulate a contextual pastoral approach. Contemporary pastoral theology emphasizes the importance of inculturation and dialogue as a way to address the challenges of the times without losing Christian identity (Bevans, 2022).

In this context, the model of pastoral ministry required is an integrative one. It must remain faithful to the teachings of the Church while being attentive to socio-cultural dynamics. Priests are not only sacramental ministers faithful to the rites, but also shepherds capable of strengthening the faith of the faithful amid currents of relativism and pragmatism. Orientation toward the salvation of souls remains the primary goal, but achieving it requires pastoral creativity and courage (Zhang, 2025). Fidelity to the Gospel must go hand in hand with openness to renewal guided by the Holy Spirit.

Thus, the theological framework of pastoral care demonstrates the harmony between tradition and dynamics, between norms and context, between sacramental identity and social commitment. Priests are called to be living icons of Christ, presenting God's love in the concrete reality of the people. Pastoral care is not merely an institutional function, but a path of holiness that demands integrity, spiritual depth, and prophetic courage (Robinson, 2024b). In light of this framework, any formulated model of care must be rooted in Christ the Shepherd and oriented toward the spiritual well-being of the people entrusted to it.

### **Model of Pastoral Ministry in the Light of *Evangelii Gaudium***

The model of pastoral ministry formulated in this section is the fruit of a reflective and exploratory reading of *Evangelii Gaudium* as a programmatic and visionary magisterial text. The document not only offers a moral invitation, but also opens a new ecclesiological horizon for a Church on the move, a Church that goes out, a Church that dares to leave comfort behind in order to be faithful to mission. Analysis of this document shows that Pope Francis desires not merely structural renewal but also a transformation of pastoral mentality (Figus-Illinyi, 2025). He speaks of pastoral conversion as a way for the Church to truly become a space of encounter between God's love and human wounds (Fransiskus, 2013). It is from this model of care that moves beyond the comfort zone that its theological foundations are derived.

Ministry that moves beyond the comfort zone is an act of faith rooted in the courage to abandon false certainties. A comfort zone does not necessarily mean luxury, but can be old, repetitive habits, established pastoral patterns that are no longer relevant, or relationships limited to specific groups. In the light of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Church is called to be a community that moves toward the periphery, rather than remaining in the safety of the center (P. Jones, 2023). Pope Francis asserts that he prefers a Church wounded by going out into the streets rather than a Church sick by being closed and comfortable in its own security (Fransiskus, 2013). This expression contains a prophetic critique of the defensive mentality that sometimes creeps into pastoral practice.

Moving outward means accepting risks. Like a pilgrim leaving his home, a priest who chooses to step out of his comfort zone must be prepared to face uncertainty, criticism, and even failure. From the perspective of contemporary mission theology, these risks are not threats to be avoided, but rather consequences of fidelity to the ever-dynamic mission of God (Bevans, 2022). The early Church was born of the courage of the apostles, who left their homes and entered the public sphere, proclaiming the Gospel in a world that often rejected them. Salvation history is replete with figures called to abandon certainty for the sake of God's promise. Abraham left his homeland in obedience to God's call, without full knowledge of the future. Moses returned to Egypt aware of the grave risks. The prophets journeyed amidst threats and persecution. The same pattern inspires pastoral ministry today.

The inspiration of Church documents emphasizes that outward movement is not merely a strategic choice, but a defining characteristic of the Church. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reclaims the missionary tradition rooted in the early Church (Doyle, 2017). However, he also acknowledges that over time, this dynamic

often fades due to changing times and institutional comfort. Technological developments, for example, offer ease of communication, but also have the potential to diminish the depth of personal encounters. Rapid digital connections often replace in-depth dialogue. In this context, priests are challenged to use technology wisely without losing the incarnational dimension of ministry (Rowlands, 2022).

Two fundamental aspects are essential in realizing ministry beyond the comfort zone. First, the courage to transcend human weakness. A secular culture that emphasizes individualism, materialism, and relativism often influences how priests view their vocation (Taghavi & Segalla, 2023). When ministry is understood as a space for self-actualization or the search for recognition, missionary spirituality is weakened. Pope Francis warns that the greatest danger is not external rejection, but internal spiritual lethargy (Fransiskus, 2013). The priestly identity crisis often stems from the reduction of ministry to a mere social function. Therefore, pastoral conversion must begin with spiritual renewal and conversion, with the realization that priests are witnesses to the Gospel before becoming mere administrators of ecclesial structures.

Authentic ministry demands humility. Priests are called to serve not for praise or popularity, but for the spiritual growth of the faithful. This humility is not a passive attitude, but rather the courage to acknowledge limitations and remain faithful to the mission. In contemporary spiritual theology, humility is seen as fundamental to ministerial integrity because it frees the minister from the temptation of spiritual narcissism (Greshake, 2021). A humble priest will more easily hear the cries of the faithful, understand their struggles, and accompany them with empathy.

The second aspect is the courage to respond to changing times. The digital world, social mobility, and cultural plurality demand a creative and contextual pastoral approach. The Church must not be trapped in a romanticism of the past that rejects renewal. Pope Francis encourages pastoral ministers to find new languages and methods for evangelizing (Fransiskus, 2013). Pastoral creativity is not a compromise with truth, but rather an effort to translate the truth of the Gospel into the idiom of the times. In this context, technology can be an effective means of evangelization, as long as it is balanced with real encounters that enliven personal relationships.

The courage to engage in change certainly carries risks. But these risks are part of fidelity to mission. The Church is called to fear the loss of souls more than the loss of institutional comfort. In social theological reflection, the courage to be present amidst the concrete realities of society is a sign of the incarnate Church (J. W. O'Malley, 2021). Priests who choose to venture into difficult pastoral terrain will discover that it is there that the Gospel becomes alive and relevant.

Biblical inspiration further clarifies this model. The Gospel of Mark depicts Jesus rising early and leaving the place where he was known to go to another city and proclaim the gospel (Mlakuzhyil, 2023). This action demonstrates that mission is more important than popularity. Jesus did not allow himself to be tied to the comfort of social acceptance. He moved according to the will of the Father. In the passage about the sending of the disciples, Jesus reminds them that they are being sent like sheep among wolves. This metaphor illustrates the challenging reality of mission. However, Jesus also advises them to be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves. Shrewdness and sincerity are two qualities that must go hand in hand in pastoral ministry.

In the contemporary context, wolves can be interpreted as the challenges of secular culture that erode faith. Individualism erodes solidarity, materialism obscures spiritual values, and relativism weakens commitment to truth. Priests who step out of their comfort zones must have the wisdom to read the situation without losing their sincerity (Sohail et al., 2025). They must not be naive, but they must also not lose their love. Pope Francis emphasized that creative and compassionate ministry is the path to meeting the challenges of our times (Fransiskus, 2013).

A ministry model that transcends the comfort zone is ultimately rooted in the spirituality of the incarnation. The Son of God emptied himself and became man in Jesus Christ. This incarnational movement becomes the paradigm for the entire life of the Church. A priest who lives this spirituality will view every outward step as a participation in the dynamic of God's saving love (Cook & Cowden, 2025). He will not fear being wounded, knowing that the wounds of ministry are often the places where God's grace is most evident.

Thus, ministry that goes beyond one's comfort zone is not a temporary strategy, but rather an expression of the Church's missionary identity. It demands courage, humility, creativity, and sincerity. In light of *Evangelii Gaudium*, this model serves as an urgent call for priests not to get stuck in sterile routines but to boldly step into challenging pastoral terrain. It is there that the Gospel finds room to blossom, and it is there that the Church reveals herself as the living sacrament of God's love in the midst of the world (DeConick, 2001).

Dialogic ministry is one of the most profound and human forms of the Church's presence in a world marked by polarization, suspicion, and social fragmentation. Since the ecclesiological renewal affirmed in

Unitatis Redintegratio and *Nostra Aetate*, the Church has increasingly recognized that its identity as a sacrament of salvation is inseparable from a dialogical attitude toward others, both within and without. Dialogue is not a temporary diplomatic strategy, but rather an essential expression of the Church's understanding of itself as a community that walks together (Gaillardetz, 2021). In this context, pastoral ministry can no longer be understood as a one-way relationship between a knowing subject and a receiving object, but as a reciprocal encounter that builds communion. This awareness finds a strong echo in the dynamics of the synodal Church today, which emphasizes the importance of listening to the entire People of God as a living locus theologicus (Faggioli, 2020a).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasizes that dialogue goes far beyond the propositional communication of truth (Sawa, 2025). Dialogue is born from the joy of speaking and sharing; it is an exchange that enriches the individuals involved. Thus, dialogue does not stop at the transmission of doctrine, but becomes a relational space where love is expressed and received. This affirmation is relevant in the contemporary pastoral context, which is often trapped in normative and administrative approaches, thus forgetting the personal and affective dimensions of proclamation. In light of this vision, priestly ministry is called to transform from an instructional model to a participatory one that positions the faithful as active partners in the dialogue (Del Gobbo, 2022).

Dialogue must first be realized within the Church itself. The internal life of the Church often harbors latent tensions between generations, between categorical groups, between liturgical preferences, and even between differing theological sensibilities. In such situations, dialogical ministry becomes a means of reconciliation and the formation of communion. Priests are called to be bridges that bridge differences, not walls that widen distances. They must be able to create a safe space where people can express their hopes, disappointments, and doubts without fear of judgment. This leadership model aligns with the Church's vision as the people of God walking together, where everyone has a voice worthy of being heard (Gaillardetz, 2021).

The essence of dialogue presupposes openness and humility. Without these two attitudes, dialogue degenerates into a veiled monologue seeking only self-legitimacy. Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of the art of listening as the foundation of a true spiritual encounter. Listening is not merely an auditory activity, but rather an openness of heart that enables closeness. In pastoral ministry, the ability to listen determines the quality of the relationship between the priest and the faithful. When a priest truly listens, he not only understands facts but also captures inner vibrations, hidden wounds, and unspoken hopes. In this context, listening becomes a healing pastoral act (McDonagh, 2021a).

The inability to listen often results in one-way, non-contextualized ministry. Even when motivated by good intentions, priests who lack a deep understanding of the concrete situation of the faithful risk exercising a ministry that becomes abstract and pastorally ineffective. Dialogic ministry, instead, stems from the lived experiences of the faithful. It is rooted in the concrete realities of daily life—stories of job loss, family crises, faith anxieties, and the search for meaning and transcendence. By placing the faithful's experience as a starting point, ministry becomes responsive and relevant. Within the framework of contemporary pastoral theology, this approach is understood as a process of shared discernment involving the *sensus fidei* of the entire people of God (Massimo, 2022).

Dialogic ministry also demands sensitivity to plurality. The Church lives in a culturally, ideologically, and religiously diverse society. In such a context, dialogue becomes a more effective means of witness than confrontation (Resane, 2022). Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, emphasizes that a culture of dialogue is the path to social fraternity. This principle applies not only to interreligious relations but also to the internal life of the Church. When priests practice respectful dialogue, they help foster a culture of mutual trust that enables the Church to be a sign of hope in a divided society (Ioris, 2022).

The biblical foundation of dialogical pastoral ministry is rooted in Jesus' constant attentiveness to marginalized persons. The story of the healing of Bartimaeus in Mark's Gospel presents a powerful image of Jesus' attentiveness to the cries of the neglected (Mirus, 2024). When the crowds attempted to silence him, Jesus stopped and called out to him. This gesture carries profound pastoral significance, demonstrating that the mission must never overlook the concrete person for the sake of functional efficiency. In the context of priestly ministry, pausing to listen symbolizes a willingness to postpone one's agenda in order to be fully present with those in need.

Jesus' question to Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk. 10:51) reveals a profoundly dialogic dimension. Jesus doesn't assume Bartimaeus's needs, even though the situation seems clear. He invites Bartimaeus to articulate his own desires. In pastoral ministry, this approach prevents a paternalistic

attitude that presumes to know everything. By asking questions, the priest creates space for the faithful to become active subjects in the process of faith growth. Sincere questions open up the possibility of transformation born of personal awareness, not external pressure (McDonagh, 2021b).

The story of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John demonstrates a dialogue that transcends social and religious boundaries (Jn. 4:1-42). Jesus begins the conversation with a simple need for water, then gradually guides the dialogue into a deeper spiritual dimension. He does not force instant revelation of himself, but allows the process to unfold gradually (L. P. Jones, 1997). This method demonstrates that true dialogue respects the inner rhythm of the interlocutor. In a pastoral context, such patience is essential, especially when dealing with people in complex situations or far from practicing their faith.

The encounter with the Samaritan woman also emphasizes that dialogue does not instantly erase differences. A misunderstanding about living water reveals differing perspectives. Yet Jesus did not end the conversation; He deepened it. Faithfulness in dialogue ultimately opened the woman's heart to a deeper understanding of truth (Elliott, 2025). Here, we see that the goal of dialogue is not argumentative victory, but rather shared growth toward truth. This principle is relevant in the life of the Church today, which is often marked by internal debate. Dialogic ministry helps navigate differences toward maturity in faith (Gaillardetz, 2021).

In light of all these reflections, dialogical ministry demands the formation of a special spirituality for priests. This spirituality is rooted in the humility of Christ, who willingly lowered himself to encounter humanity in all its limitations (Chatelier & Jackson, 2023). It demands the courage to listen to criticism, a willingness to learn from the faithful, and a sincerity in acknowledging weaknesses. In the increasingly strengthening synodal Church dynamics, priests are no longer understood as solitary figures standing above the faithful, but as brothers who walk alongside and guide them through example. Thus, dialogue is not merely a pastoral method, but a path of ecclesial conversion that shapes the Church as a living, dynamic, and faithful fellowship to the spirit of the Gospel (Faggioli, 2020a).

Pastoral ministry that is not rooted in compassion loses its evangelical vitality. It may continue to operate structurally, administratively, and even liturgically, yet it risks becoming formalistic and lacking spiritual depth, no longer radiating the living dynamism of the Gospel. Throughout the witness of Sacred Scripture, Jesus is never depicted as a figure simply fulfilling a religious duty, but as a Person moved by compassion when encountering human suffering (Reyes et al., 2025). Compassion is not merely a fleeting emotional attitude, but rather a divine inner movement that drives salvific action. Therefore, compassionate ministry is a fundamental distinction between the Church's work and social activity in general. The Church does not work merely for the sake of efficiency or program success, but rather to bring God's merciful face to the world (Harris, 2013).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis affirms that the Church is called to be a home open to all, not a fortress closed to those deemed unworthy (Piwko & Sawicka, 2024). He reminds us that mercy is an essential characteristic of God himself, as affirmed by Saint Thomas Aquinas and reiterated in the document. Mercy, in this sense, is not simply one virtue among others, but the highest manifestation of God's omnipotence, perfecting human shortcomings. If God reveals himself through mercy, then the Church, as the sacrament of salvation, is obligated to radiate the same quality in all its services (Del Gobbo, 2022).

Compassionate ministry demands a paradigm shift in pastoral life. In some contexts, pastoral practice still tends to emphasize administrative and legalistic approaches. Parish structures, bureaucracy, and sacramental governance sometimes become more dominant than personal attention to the concrete struggles of the faithful (Monteiro & Adler, 2022). As a result, some parishioners experience emotional distance from the Church and gradually lose their sense of belonging. When priests appear more as guardians of rules than as companions of grace, the Church risks losing its evangelical appeal. Pope Francis firmly reminds every community to boldly reexamine the goals, structures, styles, and methods of evangelization, lest they fall into complacency based on traditions that no longer address the needs of the times (Francis, 2013).

Mercy presupposes the courage to transcend formality. It encourages priests to see people not as statistics or recipients of sacramental services, but as individuals carrying wounds, hopes, and unique life stories. In the context of the synodal Church today, compassionate service is at the heart of the process of walking together. Synodality without compassion would turn into a cold discussion forum; instead, compassion energizes every participatory endeavor in the Church (Gaillardetz, 2021). Thus, mercy is not merely an individual ethic, but an ecclesiological principle that shapes the Church's identity as *communio*.

This vision is further deepened in *Fratelli Tutti*, where Pope Francis calls on all humanity to build a social fraternity rooted in solidarity and care for the wounded. In the document, he uses the figure of the Good Samaritan as an icon of the civilization of love (King & Noerr, 2020). The Church is called to be like the



Samaritan, not simply a community that speaks of love, but a community that stops, cares for wounds, and pays the price for the recovery of others. In the pastoral context, the priest cannot remain a neutral observer of the suffering of the people; he is called to intervene and engage concretely (Massimo, 2022).

The biblical inspiration for compassionate ministry finds a paradigmatic expression in the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (Lk. 10:25-37). In the story, a robbery victim lies on the roadside, symbolizing wounded humanity. A priest and a Levite pass by without offering assistance. They may have had religious reasons or personal fears, but the Gospel does not focus on their justification. Instead, it highlights the actions of a Samaritan who was viewed as foreign and religiously impure by the Jewish community. He was moved with compassion, approached the victim, bandaged his wounds, and covered the cost of his recovery (Steven Notley & García, 2022).

This contrast reveals a fundamental dimension of pastoral ministry. Ecclesial status or structural position does not necessarily ensure pastoral sensitivity. Compassion is born from the courage to see suffering and allow oneself to be moved by it. In the light of contemporary pastoral theology, the Samaritan's action can be understood as a paradigm of praxis that precedes normative reflection. He does not inquire first about the victim's identity or the consequences of the ritual, but acts for the sake of life. The compassionate ministry of the priest follows this logic, prioritizing human salvation over concerns for image or personal comfort (McDonagh, 2021b).

Furthermore, the story of Zacchaeus in Luke's Gospel demonstrates the transformative power of compassion (Lk. 19:1-10). Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, lived under social stigma as a sinner and traitor to the nation. However, his longing to see Jesus marked the beginning of a life-changing encounter. Jesus did not begin with accusations or moral correction, but with a personal greeting and a decision to stay at his home (Baloyi, 2024). This action went beyond social expectations and drew criticism from many, yet it lay at the heart of Christ's mission: to seek and save the lost.

The compassion Zacchaeus experienced sparked genuine repentance. He voluntarily shared his possessions and returned what had been stolen. This transformation was not the result of external pressure, but rather the fruit of experiencing unconditional acceptance (Pramanik & Khuntia, 2023). In pastoral ministry, this dynamic is crucial. When people experience genuine acceptance, they are more open to repentance and renewal of life. Conversely, a judgmental approach tends to close the door to dialogue and deepen the distance between the Church and those hurting (Millar, 2020).

Merciful ministry also demands structural reform. If bureaucracy and administration become obstacles to the experience of grace, then renewal becomes a pastoral imperative. Pope Francis reminds the Church not to become trapped in old, ineffective patterns. Structures must serve the mission, not the other way around. This principle has concrete implications for parish governance, the distribution of priests' time, and the prioritization of pastoral activities. If a significant portion of energy is absorbed by administration, while pastoral visits and personal accompaniment are neglected, then a compassionate orientation needs to be reaffirmed (Del Gobbo, 2022).

Mercy is also closely linked to priestly spirituality. Without a deep personal communion with Christ, the face of the Father's mercy, ministry easily degenerates into mere functionalism. A spirituality of mercy demands an inner sensitivity to suffering, a willingness to forgive, and the humility to acknowledge one's limitations (Hydinger et al., 2023). In recent ecclesiological reflection, the identity of the priest is increasingly understood within the framework of participatory and relational ministry. The priest is not the master of grace, but rather a servant who brings it through closeness and empathy (Gaillardetz, 2021).

In a society marked by competition and individualism, compassionate service becomes a countercultural symbol. It presents an alternative logic that focuses not on profit, but on self-giving. When the Church truly becomes a space where everyone feels accepted, loved, and supported to grow, the Gospel finds its most authentic appeal (Schnabel et al., 2025). Compassion creates a safe environment for the vulnerable, while challenging the community to be dissatisfied with minimal standards of morality.

Ultimately, compassionate service is not simply a pastoral strategy, but rather a participation in the dynamics of God's own love. It flows from the pierced heart of Christ and is constantly open to the world. Every priest who serves with compassion becomes a small reflection of that love. Through a gentle touch, a word of encouragement, and a faithful presence, compassion transforms the routine into a saving encounter (Dreitcer, 2023). In a world often harsh and heartless, a compassionate Church becomes an oasis of affirming hope (Francis, 2013). It is there that pastoral care finds its deepest meaning, as a work that not only regulates religious life but restores human dignity and leads it back to God, who is rich in mercy (Faggioli, 2020b).

## Relevance for the Ministry of Priests

Amidst rapid social change, the priestly vocation can no longer be understood as a secure position within established liturgical routines and administrative structures. Priests are called to be shepherds who boldly step beyond the boundaries of personal comfort, as emphasized in the Church's missionary vision. This spirit aligns with the pastoral renewal drive continually echoed in recent ecclesiological reflections, which emphasizes that the Church must move beyond itself toward those on the existential and social margins (Massimo, 2022).

Stepping out of one's comfort zone is primarily an inner movement. It demands heroic courage to purge motivations of any hidden interests that could potentially obscure the purity of service. Complacency, the desire for recognition, the need for psychological comfort, and even the unconscious ambition for self-actualization can become subtle obstacles that shackle the dynamics of mission. From a contemporary pastoral theology perspective, the renewal of the Church always begins with the renewal of its servants, namely, the ongoing conversion of heart (Gaillardetz, 2021). Without the courage to acknowledge and let go of these attachments, service risks becoming merely an institutional function, rather than a life-giving encounter.

Externally, comfort zones are also shaped by increasingly complex secular cultural pressures. Materialism, subjectivism, and moral relativism are not only social phenomena but also shape the way of thinking of the faithful and pastoral care workers themselves (Lourenço Figueira Andrade & J. Grenaz, 2023). The challenges of globalization and digitalization create new relational patterns that often reduce faith to a private experience detached from the community. In this context, priests are required to bravely face reality without defensiveness, but rather with humble missionary creativity (Del Gobbo, 2022).

The courage to leave the comfort zone demands concrete changes in pastoral praxis. *First*, priests need to be willing to change old practices that may no longer be effective. An exclusive focus on sacramental ministry, while remaining essential, needs to be complemented by more dialogic and participatory spiritual spaces, especially for young people seeking authentic and communicative faith experiences. Recent pastoral studies have shown that young people are more engaged when the Church offers inclusive and reflective community experiences, not just formal rituals (McDonagh, 2021b).

*Second*, the use of digital technology has become an indispensable mission field. Social media and online communication platforms can serve as a means of evangelization, faith consultation, and a space for dialogue that brings priests and congregations together in a more open dynamic. However, technology should not replace the personal encounter that is at the heart of pastoral ministry. Incarnational theology affirms that real presence and human touch have a transformative power that cannot be replaced by virtual communication (Gaillardetz, 2021).

*Third*, the courage to step out of one's comfort zone is evident in the willingness to meet the faithful directly, especially those outside the core ministry circle. Pastoral visits are not merely a structural formality, but rather encounters that allow the priest to get to know the concrete faces of his congregation. There, he becomes not only a teacher but also a companion on the journey. This approach aligns with the synodal ideal of the Church, namely, a Church that walks together, listens, and shares experiences of faith (Massimo, 2022).

Thus, leaving one's comfort zone is not an impulsive act, but rather a purposeful spiritual commitment. It requires the courage to break old patterns, open oneself to new learning, and prioritize the needs of the faithful. In this process, the priest bears witness to the fact that the Gospel is always alive and relevant, not confined to nostalgia for the past, but present in the dynamics of the times.

Dialogic ministry is rooted in the belief that the Holy Spirit works not only through the hierarchy but also through the faith experience of the faithful. Therefore, priests are called to cultivate an active and respectful listening attitude. Listening is not merely a passive activity, but rather a theological act that recognizes the dignity of the people's voice as part of the *sensus fidei*. Recent ecclesiological reflection affirms that the synodal Church is built on the practice of reciprocal listening between the priest and the faithful (Gaillardetz, 2021).

Through authentic dialogue, priests can identify concrete issues facing the faithful, both spiritually and socially. Family issues, economic pressures, digital addiction, identity crises, and even struggles with faith amidst pluralism are pastoral challenges that demand sensitivity. Without dialogue, pastoral policies risk becoming abstract and out of touch with the lived realities of the faithful. Conversely, when decisions are made through a participatory process, the faithful feel valued and involved in shared responsibility. This strengthens their sense of belonging to the Church as their common home (Massimo, 2022).

Dialogic ministry also demands humility to learn. The priest not only provides direction but also receives insights from the experiences of the faithful. This relationship creates a complementary dynamic, where authority is not understood as domination, but rather as enabling service. In the context of pastoral leadership,

the participatory model has been shown to increase engagement among the faithful and reduce the psychological distance between the priest and the faithful (McDonagh, 2021b).

Dialogic practices can begin with simple steps. A warm greeting after the Eucharist, a casual, sincere conversation, or a pastoral visit to a parishioner's home creates spaces for meaningful encounter. There, the priest appears not as a distant and unreachable figure, but as a shepherd who knows his flock. Pastoral research shows that consistent personal relationships increase the trust of the faithful in Church leadership (Del Gobbo, 2022).

In situations where service schedules are often busy, the priest's personal initiative is key. Especially for those who are rarely actively involved or only attend major celebrations, a proactive approach can open up space for reconciliation and re-engagement. The dialogue that develops is not intended to be judgmental, but rather to provide a safe space for sharing stories and wounds. From there, the mutual trust that forms the foundation of a healthy faith community grows.

Dialogic ministry ultimately reflects the face of a Church willing to walk together. It rejects closed and elitist leadership models and chooses a path of humility that opens up space for participation. In this dynamic, the priest becomes a facilitator of encounter, not the center of attention. He fosters harmony in diversity and allows the Spirit to work through honest and open conversation.

Mercy is at the heart of the Church's mission. Without it, the ministry loses its soul and becomes a dry administrative procedure. In contemporary theological reflection, mercy is understood not as an emotional sentiment but as a theological attitude that reflects God's way of relating to humanity (McDonagh, 2021b). It transcends rigid legal boundaries and touches the very heart of human dignity.

Compassionate ministry imitates Jesus' approach to those on the margins. Priests are called to embrace those on the margins, whether due to poverty, marital failure, addiction, or social stigma. In today's judgmental social context, the Church must be a space of acceptance and healing. An emphasis on inclusivity and social solidarity is a key characteristic of contemporary pastoral care (Massimo, 2022).

Pastoral compassion also demands wisdom. It does not ignore the truth, but communicates it in a healing way. In pastoral practice, this means avoiding the trap of administrative legalism that closes the door to the vulnerable. The Church is called to be an embracing mother, not an expelling judge. This perspective aligns with a pastoral approach that prioritizes relational healing (Del Gobbo, 2022).

Compassionate service is not based on the subjective preferences of the minister. It transcends likes or dislikes, comfort or discomfort. The priest acts as a representative of God's universal love. This awareness frees ministry from discrimination and opens up space for authentic inclusivity. Within the framework of missional theology, this attitude reflects the Church's identity as a sacrament of salvation for all (Gaillardetz, 2021).

When priests live out compassion, the faithful experience the warmth of the Gospel in concrete ways. The wounded find hope, the marginalized find a home, and the despairing find new meaning. Such service is a sign that God is still at work in history. It is not merely a theological theory, but a reality that can be touched in everyday relationships.

Thus, stepping out of one's comfort zone, engaging in dialogue, and practicing mercy are not three separate agendas, but rather a unified pastoral vision. These three constitute the face of a priest relevant to our times. In humble courage, open conversation, and inclusive love, priestly ministry finds the beauty of its vocation. It serves as a bridge between God and humanity, bringing the ever-new joy of the Gospel to a world thirsting for meaning.

## CONCLUSION

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reaffirms the Church's purpose in this world: to proclaim the Gospel to all people. The Church is a source of hope for those who experience injustice, discrimination, poverty, and various other social problems. One form of pastoral ministry that embodies this hope is carried out by ministers who have the courage to step out of their comfort zones, are willing to build inclusive dialogue, and are grounded in compassion.

First, ministers can step out of their comfort zones, for example, by setting aside personal time to visit the people they serve and to build strong relationships with them. Second, dialogical ministry can begin through simple conversations with the faithful—such as greeting them after Mass—by making space and time to listen and by taking the initiative to engage them. Third, compassionate ministry occurs when it is not limited by existing systems or administrative structures, but is instead willing to help and accompany those who are facing difficulties.

These three forms of pastoral ministry are deeply interconnected. Outreach ministry can only be carried out when it is rooted in compassion and accompanied by a genuine willingness to engage in dialogue, so that

pastoral responses may be shaped according to the realities of the people. Dialogical ministry, in turn, requires the courage to step beyond one's comfort zone and the openness to listen attentively to others. Furthermore, compassionate ministry serves as the foundation of all pastoral activity. Yet such compassion becomes concrete only when pastoral ministers are willing to enter into authentic dialogue with the faithful and to move beyond their own limitations in order to respond to the needs they encounter.

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