

Daniel P. Grigassy, O.F.M.

## From Seminary to Parish

*Daydreams took him to another time, another place. A year had already passed since his ordination to the ministerial priesthood. Ted Young found himself back in those last months at St.*

*Leo's Seminary. Fr. Joe DiVecchio, director of pastoral studies, walked into the room where the fourth-year students assembled for their weekly seminar on "Transition from Seminary to Parish." After the opening prayer the first words out of the professor's mouth made them all squirm: "Consistently we get reports from people and pastors that first-year priests are eager and enthusiastic but they can't deal with more than one thing at a time." He proceeded to discuss a case study demonstrating his claim. Most students felt that Father DiVecchio and the other professors tended to overstate the demands and expectations on parish priests. How close to reality was this evaluation of those who went before them? After the seminar Steve Dolski, one of Ted's classmates, tried to add some perspective: "Those case studies that DiVecchio gives us can't possibly be real; they're like bad soap opera scripts! Life can't possibly get so complex! Don't you think so? There's a method here. He always exaggerates just to make his point. It's one of those new teaching devices. He keeps on warning and admonishing us only because he cares so much about us! Relax! Take one thing at a time and everything will be fine!"*

*Steve's words of wisdom made sense to the others so eagerly awaiting their ordination day. But Ted stewed: "Already so many of my good friends have washed out only two or three years after ordination and placement in a parish! Such great guys, but what happened to them?" During the last weeks in the safe environment of St. Leo's, thoughts of the future overwhelmed him. The seminary culture was about to give way to something new and unfamiliar. Father DiVecchio's constant refrain echoed: "The real test is the long haul." For the rest of the year Ted's exterior radiated mature confidence while his insides flinched like a frightened boy's.*

*The other deacons were chomping at the bit to get out and "finally do something with all this education." During their monthly seminar on transitions Steve Dolski anticipated the future: "After all these years we're moving out into the mainstream! That's the reason we came here*

*in the first place. Our education and formation will be tested when we apply theories to practical situations that come to us every day in the parish."*

*Ted snapped out of his daydream. Six months had passed since he was ordained a priest and assigned to St. Boniface, a large multicultural urban parish. What a great mentor he had in Monsignor Denburger! All the parishioners loved and respected him. One of Ted's first responsibilities was to oversee preparations for the communal anointing of the sick. This rite was seasonally celebrated within the context of the 11:00 Sunday Mass. He negotiated with members of the youth group and their parents, as he had done three months ago, to manage the transport of house-bound seniors to the church. The collaboration of so many people provided an experience of strength in communal service for young and old alike. As usual the communal anointing was announced in the bulletin on several prior Sundays. At all the Masses on the preceding Sunday Monsignor Denburger himself extended an invitation to the entire parish. Ted felt confident. He anticipated another gathering of people praying for Christ's healing grace on the sick, but events unfolded differently this time around.*

*After Mass on Tuesday morning Marge Breslin told Ted the sad news that her teenage son just entered a particularly debilitating phase of cystic fibrosis: "Chip was diagnosed with CF as an infant and for the past thirteen years we've tried to keep it a family secret. Sure, I want prayers for him, especially now! But what will people think when he presents himself for the anointing even though he still looks healthy? It's not like he's going to die tomorrow. What should we do?" After a brief conversation with Marge, Ted reassured her that he would check out the matter and get back to her sometime before noon tomorrow.*

*When Ted returned to the rectory he found a note in his mailbox from Gino Panino, a forty-nine-year-old banker and member of the parish liturgy committee. Gino proposed that the communal anointing focus particularly on mid-life crisis. Ted felt himself cringe. The note continued:*

*Mid-Life is a time of upheaval touching the physical as well as every other facet of the human person. It's a first experience of diminishment, a time of disorientation when we come to terms with our own mortality and deeply need the healing of the One who has redeemed all cycles of human life. Since the sacrament of anointing is now about life and health rather than death, this seems the way to go.*

*Ted recalled that the parish liturgy committee planned to meet that evening at 7:30.*

Later that morning Ted checked his voice mail. He had a message from Guadalupe O'Toole, the married daughter of Mrs. Marina Lopez, who just returned home from two weeks at Providence Hospital. Guadalupe sought his advice: "Is it too soon to bring my mother to church this Sunday? The hospital chaplain, Sister Patrice, visited her and brought her communion many times. She even anointed her before surgery." Ted was stunned and speechless. Father DiVecchio's voice echoed in his head: "The priest is the only proper minister of the anointing of the sick." But Sister Patrice has given all the pastoral care! She's such an important member of our parish staff—and I like her so much, Ted thought. The last thing I want to do is hurt her or alienate her! He snapped out of his trance and wrote a note to himself to call Guadalupe after lunch tomorrow.

The doorbell rang and a small group of angry and disturbed parishioners demanded a meeting with Ted. "Word's out, Father," the spokesman said. "Everyone knows you invited that guy with AIDS to be anointed next Sunday. We've already told the pastor. If you don't tell the kid and his family that we don't want them here, we'll make things real ugly. We'll raise such hell outside the church before and after Mass you'll wish you never knew us." Ted remained dispassionate and assured the group that he heard their message. As they left there was ice in the air—and Ted sighed, "What next?"

A phone call came in just before supper. Mrs. Nguyen Bong wanted to talk to a priest. Ted overheard the receptionist: "The pastor isn't home but I'm sure Father Ted would be happy to speak with you." He picked up the phone, said hello, and Mrs. Nguyen began to speak: "Father, I'm sure you remember me; I was just baptized at the Easter Vigil. My husband's mother has recently come to visit us from Viet Nam. After such a long trip she fell ill for several weeks. At first we were very concerned, but she seems to be improving each day, thank God! I was so happy to hear the pastor's invitation to come to this Sunday's anointing service. My mother-in-law is a Buddhist, a very devout one! Could she be anointed, Father?" Once again Ted felt stymied, said he would have to check, and promised an answer by phone before supper tomorrow.

At the beginning of supper that evening Monsignor Denburger said: "Ted, it looks like I'll have to leave for Pittsburgh right after the early Mass on Sunday. A family matter; I have no choice. So you'll take the 11:00 Mass, okay? Oh, yes, you'll have the sacrament of anointing after the homily. Ah! How I love to preach at anointing services! Don't you?" Ted's ears began to whistle. He couldn't find words to begin a response after all that had hit him the last few hours. Before he could get a word out of his mouth the pastor asked: "How 'bout those Orioles last

*night? Some game, huh?" Ted felt that frightened boy flinch inside him once again. For the rest of the meal they talked sports.*

*Monsignor Denburger skipped dessert and ran off to a finance committee meeting. And there at the table sat Ted, anxious and confused: "If only I had more time! So many questions all at once, and so many phone calls to make. When will I find time to prepare Sunday's homily? What on earth will I say? And the liturgy committee meets in half an hour!" Ted had an itch to pick up the phone and call someone—anyone!—just to chatter and let off steam. He looked at his watch, reached for the phone and flipped through the Rolodex. "Should I phone Joe DiVecchio at the seminary or Steve Dolski at the neighboring parish?"*

\* \* \*

A case study can be used in different ways as a method of teaching and learning. Various points of entry into the dilemma access the complexity of the situation. The case provides a narrative that draws readers into its life and engages them vicariously with persons and issues. This case sketches out a day in the life of a young priest, one who recently bid farewell to the seminary and is now struggling to find his sea legs in parochial ministry. Ted had more than a few apprehensions about what would confront him in the everyday ebb and flow of parish life. The case catches him in a spin of external concerns and internal conflict. A bit of his mind, heart, and spirit are made available to the imaginations of all who engage him. The rushed sequence of events is meant to exasperate. It demonstrates the way questions "come at you" in rapid intervals and demand quick thinking.

Ted Young's story animates discussion on two theological questions that thread through the entire case: Who may anoint and who may be anointed? A multicultural context with real names and faces serves to stimulate the imagination; it also invites various points of entry. Real flesh is wrapped around what could otherwise turn into a classic classroom discussion steeped in the dry bones of pure theory and speculation. The case challenges the student to ask several questions: What do I know? What do I think? What do I feel? What would I do? Cognition, attitudes, and skills are tested, stretched, and expanded. The purpose here is not to respond to all the issues in the case. Nor is it to entertain its every discernable dimension. It is rather to suggest ways to use the case, possible doorways for teaching and learning. A flashback begins the case. The innovative seminary

system tries to build a bridge between seminary and parish by way of a weekly case study seminar. Anyone who has been about the business of seminary education knows the familiar apprehension embodied in the character of Steve Dolski: "These hypothetical situations are just too complex. Real life can't possibly be like that!" A certain suspicion, even cynicism, permeates Steve's last days in ministerial formation. In contrast, those involved in seminary work may have had the pleasant experience of a young priest visiting the seminary after a year or two. He smiles at anxious fourth-year students frenetically preparing for the final comprehensive exercise. His simple comment sparks a major insight: "Every day in ministry is a comprehensive exam!"

A good case study helps to accelerate that conviction; it is supple enough to stretch the imagination, to secure presbyterial identity, and to build the confidence necessary to function productively and effectively, especially when pressure builds and time is short. Ted ought to have quick access to data, but he fumbles because he lacks familiarity with basic information that a professional ought to have readily available. His self-confidence languishes while he further complicates his day by amassing several phone calls to almost every person who crossed his path.

The flashback section of the case suggests the initial tension. The very surnames—Young and DiVecchio (old)—counterpoint one another, subtly insinuating the struggle between youth's apprehension and the wisdom of more mature years. Disclosed later in the case is a strained relationship with Monsignor Denburger, a good man, though blind to the needs of the young priest who lacks the assertiveness to raise pressing issues. These mutual restraints serve to exacerbate the situation, which is purposely set up to agitate the reader.

Not only is Ted's responsibility to answer questions within a narrow time frame, but also to devise pastoral strategies for each situation in his day of intrigue. Marge Breslin needs to be reassured that it is most appropriate to bring Chip to Sunday's celebration (canon 1004.2). Likewise Chip's preparation for the sacrament may strengthen him and its grace enable him to deal more effectively with the approach of this new stage in his illness. The actual event of the Church praying the sacrament may embrace the Breslins and carry them through the rigors of the months ahead while the entire parish walks with them.

Remember how Gino Panino's request made Ted wince. He knows that a prevalent attitude toward anointing is often ex-

pressed in the phrase: "Could do me some good; can't do me any harm!" He knows that the practice of indiscriminate anointing is to be challenged, but Gino takes the discussion in quite a different direction. Before the committee meets this evening Ted has to sort things out and take a stand. How can he exercise pastoral leadership and safeguard the integrity of the sacrament of anointing without losing Gino's positive energy? Ted is convinced that mid-life does not fall under the heading of "seriously ill." Perhaps Gino and his friends ought to celebrate not the sacrament of anointing but a communal rite of penance and reconciliation with focus on the sinful human condition experienced in the process of aging. What they seek is a ritual to reconcile them to the passage of time and their own physical diminishment. Appropriate catechesis would help to predispose these mid-lifers to ritual options without alienating them from Ted or the Church. It may even make them fellow evangelizers. [For another approach to a similar case, see Michael Himes, *NTR* 4:2 (Feb. 1991) 64–67.] Guadalupe O'Toole's innocent question about her mother's eligibility for the sacrament throws Ted into the thick of tensions between pastoral care of the sick and the proper minister of the sacrament. Current polity states that "every priest, but only a priest, can validly administer the anointing of the sick" (canon 1003.1). Ted may be well aware of the historical unfolding of this sacrament, which gives some precedent to anointing by ministers other than presbyters, yet he must face present realities. How will he answer Guadalupe's question in such a way that she and her mother properly understand the sacrament, as well as Sister Patrice's important hospital ministry? How will he handle Sister Patrice's frustration and that of other such pastoral care givers?

Recall the ornery crowd contesting the worthiness of the nameless man with AIDS. Ted is pressed against the wall and challenged by a harsh reality. How long has our country been struggling with this disease? Can there be anyone lacking compassion for those who suffer so terribly? Ted's dispassion toward this mean-spirited crowd defuses its negative energy. Yet, with little time left, how can he avoid an ugly scene on Sunday? Perhaps there are agencies in the area better equipped to challenge the profound and lingering ignorance among such reactive groups. Collaboration with these agencies may help him displace the fear that comes from ignorance; it may also ease the task of catechizing these cantankerous Catholics. Ted must encourage

“that guy with AIDS” and his family and friends to come on Sunday. Sacraments may not be denied to those who ask for them (canon 843.1). The Church must be large-hearted enough to pray with those who suffer from every kind of illness whatever its source or cause. Therein lies Ted’s task as peacemaker and evangelizer.

Mrs. Nguyen Bong’s mother-in-law is still a devout Buddhist. Bong herself has been recently baptized and is still reflecting on its meaning, but her intent on some form of healing prayer for her mother-in-law cannot be thwarted or dismissed. The pastor’s blanket invitation sent mixed signals to a multicultural community. The Vietnamese culture demands attention and respect for elders. Yet how can Ted use Bong’s baptismal enthusiasm to help her understand that this elder may participate in the praying but not in the anointing? Ted has to find a way to attend to Bong’s desire while at the same time clarifying the meaning of the sacrament. No doubt some priests facing a similar situation would sidestep tensions by simply anointing the woman. But Ted feels caught. He knows that a baptized person of another Christian Church may be anointed if there is danger of death or some other grave and pressing need (canon 844.4). He also knows that an unbaptized person cannot be admitted to the other sacraments (canon 842.1). Ted’s task is to clarify confusions and to find ways of providing ongoing pastoral care for the entire Nguyen family.

Ted Young’s story intends to build a ramp between seminary culture and the realities of parish ministry. Supple and pliant as the case is, it holds within itself several possible teaching and learning goals: (1) to assure learners that stories they hear about the flurry of demands that “come at you” in a brief period of time are not far from the truth; (2) to stretch one’s ability to deal with several important issues all at one time; (3) to alert participants to the human dimensions of chronic illness that challenge not only house-bound seniors but also young people who appear to be in good health; (4) to challenge those engaged by the case to make a choice about ways of dealing with various interest groups seeking to express themselves at transitional junctures along life’s way or during early stages of terminal illness; (5) to humanize the reader to feelings and affections that are operative within the narrative and to respond to them appropriately; (6) to penetrate communication systems between pastors and parochial vicars; (7) to address the strain that arises when a good pastor is not a good mentor; (8) to challenge students to make connections be-

tween liturgical law and pastoral praxis; (9) to inform students of the sacramental polity of the Roman Church; and (10) to assist them in appropriating a balanced ministerial identity even as normative practice sometimes frustrates pastoral realities and relationships. Of these several possible goals only a few can be achieved in one class session. By no means are these ten points an exhaustive listing of goals. They suggest areas that float to the top layer of interest and locate points of entry into the case. The richness of any case study is that “there is always more.”

So often students are sent out soaring at thirty thousand feet as they leave theologates and seminaries. Soon the responsibility of ministry is placed on them and they find themselves in a free fall, at least for a time. Often underdeveloped or not even tested before takeoff are the attitudes and skills that provide the necessary stamina to pilot the body of theological knowledge back to planet Earth by way of developing pastoral strategies. A case like this one helps to develop that stamina. It carves out a slice of parochial life where theological, pastoral, spiritual, and personal formation necessarily converge. Before pastoral strategies can be developed, questions need answers: What do I know? What do I think? What do I feel? What would I do? Knowledge, values, judgments, decisions, behaviors, and strategies for action are necessarily uncovered and connected. Cognitive skills and attitudinal dimensions coalesce to create an experience of insight and integration, although vicarious, which broadens the horizons of those who prepare to take on the full-time charge of pastoral care before it is thrust upon them.

---

*Daniel P. Grigassy, O.F.M., chairs the Department of Word and Worship at the Washington Theological Union, Washington, D.C.*