

Some Pastoral Counseling Do's and Don'ts

By James T. Bretzke, S.J., S.T.D.*

University of San Francisco

In general I suggest the following “*questions*” to help guide pastoral responses to a particular person (s) whom you meet for any sort of pastoral counseling (outside of confession). One doesn't have to “answer” or “address” these questions in a programmatic fashion, but I think they are helpful in formulating a response that is both concrete and pastorally helpful. After the questions I indicate some further observations as *points to ponder*. Neither the questions nor the following points are absolute rules or invariable principles; use them judiciously to the extent that they are helpful, and leave this or that question or point aside if it doesn't seem to apply or is not appropriate in a given concrete situation.

8 Starting Questions:

- 1) What is my *pastoral role* in this case and what am I being *asked* to do?
- 2) What are the morally relevant *features* of this case?
- 3) What are the *presuppositions* both I and the other(s) bring to this case?
- 4) What further *information* is needed in order to respond to this case?
- 5) What are the moral *principles* operative in this case?
- 6) What kind of a pastoral *response* should I make in this case? and
- 7) What kind of pastoral *strategies* would I use in my response?
- 8) And perhaps the *most important pastoral* question: Who and/or what is *most in need of reconciliation* in this situation?

Further Points to Ponder

Take an appropriate amount of time. Watch trying to rush a session. People need time to tell their stories, and it's probably best to let them do so in their own way, in their own words, and in their own speed. Yet, this is not an absolute “rule”—some people will need help in bringing the session to both a close and closure. Don't feel that everything must be either addressed or solved in one session. Don't be afraid to set up a follow-up session (or more).

Track your questioning carefully and please be judicious in your use of questions. Why are you asking this or that question? Certainly ask a question for clarification if there is some item which seems crucial to your understanding of the person's story, but which isn't clear to you (yet) in their telling of the story. However, I'd avoid asking questions just in order to have the “full picture” or “all

*This material is discussed in greater detail in “Navigating in the Morally Complex World: Casuistry with a Human Face,” Chapter 6 of my *A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004): 161-190.

the facts,” since the purpose of the session really is healing and not some after-the-fact adjudication of responsibility or criminality. I think this last point is particularly important in dealing with situations involving a long-past event which continues to haunt someone, such as abortion. Rather than go into great detail about just how the pregnancy came about and the circumstances which led to the abortion decision I think it probably would be more helpful to stay with the person where she or he is here and now. What do they feel “now”? Why? How can we bring God more tangibly into this person’s life and self-awareness here and now?

Try to focus not merely on the “intellectual” but also on the emotional and affective dimensions. The heart, more than the head, is probably crucial in our moral living. Questions like “Do you believe God can forgive you?” may elicit an intellectual “yes” (a notional assent), which has not reached the depths of the person’s heart which is still crying out “No! God can’t forgive me!” Effective pastoral counseling will have to try and convince and change the heart more than the head, so try and keep this in mind in devising your pastoral strategies.

Take their Problem Seriously, but watch the Problem-Solving tendency. This guideline calls for a definite balancing act. The person must feel that she or he is being taken seriously and that you really do understand *their* issue (even if it is not or would not be a troubling issue for you). Be careful not to homilize or too easily present a solution based on generalities like “God will hear and answer your prayers.” On the other hand, try not to get sidetracked into a discussion of how to resolve the issue in a social service mode. This is a natural tendency for those in the helping professions—to try and resolve the pastoral issue by “solving” the problem which brings the person to you. Try and stick with the pastoral issue itself, and bring the person into a deeper relation with God, which is usually should be the focus of the encounter. Remember too that some problems just cannot (or will not) be solved this side of heaven. Entrusting the person and his or her problem to God’s loving Providence may be the only (and/or best) thing that can be done at this point in time.

Avoid the tendency to adjudicate questions of moral guilt and relative culpability. In most cases your pastoral role does *not* call for you to determine the person’s subjective guilt and/or relative moral culpability that may have existed when he, she or others did whatever it is that seems to be part of the case. Stay with the person(s) you have in front of you and help them resolve guilt issues by turning to God’s forgiveness and reconciliation. Help move them forward into the future, and backwards to replay the past. This does not mean paying no attention to the past; clearly this must be done. But the relevant pastoral role and issue rarely legitimately centers on trying to judge the past in great detail to determine in detail relative subjective guilt and responsibility.

Keep God in the picture. Even if He has to remain in the background for the person you’re talking to (if that person would not be “ready” for a more explicit referencing of the discussion to God and God’s loving presence), *you* should keep in mind that God is very much present and working with and through you.

Stay in the present tense. Many pastoral issues obviously will have their roots in the past, but we cannot go back in time and change whatever action, decision, event, etc., that had a part to play in bringing the person to you. However, you can deal with the person in the present and move them to the future. God forgives the past, He doesn't "erase" it so that we can then "re-record" our lives in a different way. Forgiving the past allows us to move ahead (not back) into our present and future.

Be careful of using technical jargon or abstract principles. While it is important that you do know these things, it probably is not overly useful to bring them into your pastoral conversation, except in rare circumstances when you might want to clarify a key point with the person you're speaking with.

Be careful of suggesting an action-plan if you don't know the person's situation adequately. One size doesn't fit all in pastoral counseling, and total honesty may not always be the best policy. For example, in dealing with a woman who has undergone an abortion some years before she married her present spouse it may not always be the best thing for her to tell her husband. Much would depend on this woman, her relationship with her husband, and a host of other issues. A related principle would be to try and keep a number of possible options open or various pastoral strategies so that if one line or approach doesn't seem to be working you can then fall back on Plan B or Plan C, and so on.

Track your own feelings and reactions. This is always important, but is absolutely crucial when dealing with someone whose problem, character, political leanings, etc., rub you the wrong way. Remember that your pastoral role rarely (if ever!) would call for you to "judge" the person or get them to ascribe to your political leanings. This also applies even in cases where you know that you're "right" and/or in complete agreement with what the Church clearly teaches on a certain matter. Pastorally the key is to facilitate God's working in this person, and God often convinces in subtle and slow ways, so it is important to keep the person open to God's Spirit. Remember that true conversion takes time, and may involve a number of detours.

Don't feel you have to go it alone. You can make referrals and you can ask others for advice. A trusted mentor that you check in with periodically can also be helpful as you reflect on your pastoral experiences and approaches. Nevertheless, remember that the person did come to *you*, and if you make a referral too quickly or too easily they may feel either rejected or that their problem is so great or that their sin is so terrible that they cannot easily find help or forgiveness. Yet, do not try to handle a situation or question which you realize is clearly beyond your competence. You can say "Let me pray about this a bit and let's meet again," or "Part of your issue involves a technical question (e.g., a point in canon law) that I am not sure of, and I'll need to clarify this point with someone better versed (assuring them that this will be done in both an anonymous and confidential manner!)." Don't be afraid to ask one of your old teachers or someone in the parish or diocesan office for help in these sorts of cases.

A Final Note: Keep the person in your prayers. Not everyone will be in a place where they might feel comfortable to actually pray with you, or to be prayed over, but I think with most people you *can* let them know that you will continue to keep them in your prayers—which means that you are telling them that God continues to keep them (and you!) in His provident care, concern, and love. Please remember that as God’s minister you are also in His special care as well!