Hope for Those Mired in Mud: Toward a Nonprofessional Christian Ministry of Practical Wisdom
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The Protestant ministry seems to be in rather sad shape these days. Morale is low, the demands are high, and “clergy burnout” has become a hot topic. Members of the clergy seem to have lost their bearings. Unsure about what their vocation is, and beset by the frequently unrealistic demands placed on them by their parishioners, clergy have frequently resorted to insisting that they are no better and no worse than the laity. They are, after all, “only human.”

Protestants tend to think Roman Catholics are in better shape. After all, while there are important and serious questions to be raised about Roman Catholic understandings of ministry (e.g., questions about the vocation of women), they at least have the advantage of maintaining the importance of office and the pursuit of holiness which accompanies that office. Or so Protestants sometimes tend to think.

But along comes Joe Hackett, a Roman Catholic priest who is the main character in J. F. Powers’ novel, Wheat That Springeth Green. The pathologies of contemporary ministry have also infected Hackett’s Roman Catholicism, particularly through the “professionalization” of the ministry. Indeed, juxtaposing Powers’ portrayal of Hackett with the fourth-century Bishop Ambrose’s account of the ideal character of Christian clergy reveals some themes which suggest how Protestants and Catholics alike might recover a ministry of practical wisdom.

I. JOE HACKETT AND THE PATHOLOGIES OF PROFESSIONALIZED MINISTRY

Joe Hackett, who comes from a prosperous Catholic family in Minnesota, decides to become a priest. When he reaches the seminary he realizes that he has begun what is “simply the hardest job in the world: getting to know God, growing more like God, growing in holiness.” Holiness, after all, is “the only ambition worthy of the priest and therefore of candidates for the priesthood.” It is something the whole world is “crying for,” and as the retreat master had reminded the seminarians, “you can’t give what you haven’t got, lads.” Joe is so earnest in his concern for holiness that he asks the rector during a question period, “Father, how can we make sanctity as attractive as sex to the common man?” (48).

It soon becomes clear, however, that Joe is a long way from becoming truly holy. Joe’s quest for holiness takes him through a rigorous “spiritual training” of ascetic disciplines and haughty scolding of other seminarians for their lack of holiness. His life at the seminary is characterized more by sanctimoniousness than sanctity.

Joe moves out from the seminary to serve various appointments. Although he is
beginning to recognize that holiness is acquired through people rather than in bypassing them, he is still a long way from a holy character. The lures of worldly power and enjoyment prove irresistible. Indeed, at the age of forty-four Joe settles comfortably into the world of being pastor of the suburban parish, SS Frances and Clare. Joe learns to characterize himself not in terms of his office but by the standards of other “professions.”

Joe is a “builder” of programs who is “managing” the parish, and he is quite proud of the fiscal system he has installed. He indicates that “we don’t talk about [money] here—in church. We just present the bill for services rendered, like doctors and lawyers” (151). Joe is characterized as being in “lower middle management” (228), and he recognizes that one of his chief problems is that he is “a poor administrator for a pastor in the modern world of today” (262). He reflects that people are too busy today worrying about public relations to even want to be saints (198).

Those activities which used to be a regular part of Joe’s life have become foreign to him. Prayer and meditation no longer interest him much. He fears that both God and he would be bored. He still says Mass and hears confession, though these seem to be at best marginal to his tasks. Classical presumptions of the ministerial office and such activities as serving at Christ’s altar, counseling people in the path of virtue, and ministering to the poor seem a long way—indeed a world away—from Joe’s daily routine.

Moreover, the Scriptures are virtually absent from Joe’s life. Most of his time is spent in “professional” activities and conversations. Only occasionally does Joe see fit to hit someone in the face with “a custard pie of theology” (113).

Even in the midst of his professionalized ministry, however, Joe carries with him a lingering sense that holiness ought to be more important than it is. He senses that the clergy ought to be people of character who provide wise counsel and the waters of salvation. But they are unable to do so because, like beached whales, they are mired in mud. So they cope by taking pride in their professional status. They provide a service, present a bill, and promise no more than would be expected of any other occupation or role.


But that is to put the matter too simply. While Joe recognizes, albeit dimly, that the clergy are certainly to blame for the loss of the pursuit of holiness and sense of office, he also recognizes that questions about the clergy’s character have to do with the church that calls them and provides them with tasks to do. Those tasks, Joe discovers, often inhibit the pursuit of holiness and the development of character. They focus the clergy’s attention not on matters of judgment and grace, salvation and holiness, but on maintaining the institution or, worse, trying to provide a bulwark for the society.

Indeed, the lack of communities that care about virtue and holiness militate against Joe’s lurking hunch that he ought to be more than simply another kind of professional. In conversation with fellow priests, Joe notes that there were frequent reports, like those of flying saucers, of parishes where priests and people were doing great things together. “But I’ve never seen one myself, if it’s any consolation to you guys” (200). If the clergy find reports of Christian
community to be as incredible as those of flying saucers, then it is to be expected that even those priests who see their vocation in terms of office and their lives as the pursuit of holiness will have difficulty in realizing these goals.

Joe knows that priests often feel thwarted, useless, and demoralized, for he himself often feels that way. He has a recurring problem with alcohol and a profound sense of loneliness and isolation. Ironically, though Joe’s worldliness gives him a power and a status he did not have in the seminary, it also eats at his character and leaves him questioning his vocation.

In the midst of his service at SS Frances and Clare, Joe begins to realize that if friendships are to be developed—with God and with other people in community—a renewed focus on the imitation of Christ is needed. The church’s one reason for being, Joe discovers, is the cross (210). From the perspective of that cross “whether we succeed or fail is immaterial” (240). What matters is faithfulness. Joe recognizes that the church’s witness to the cross of Jesus Christ requires that it be a mirror of holiness, not a mirror of the world.

Joe thinks that perhaps a radical renewal similar to that provided by St. Benedict is needed. He notes “a few monks saved civilization once. Could be the answer again. Principle’s sound. You’d have to workout the details. Wouldn’t have to be monks. Could happen right here” (202). But it is more difficult for it to happen “right here.” For as Rowan Greer puts it in a discussion of fourth-century understandings of ministry, “The fact that the priest must preserve the spiritual and moral ideals of the monk in the context of the world means that his office is not only more difficult but also more honorable.”  

In Joe’s case, it involves resisting the various pressures—from the hierarchy, from his congregation, from the culture, from himself—to see himself merely as a professional providing a particular service. Instead he needs to emphasize—as Benedict in a different setting did—that from the perspective of God’s Kingdom, there are no activities more important than prayer, celebrating the sacraments, reading and proclaiming Scripture, and caring for those on the margins of life. But Joe still fails to recognize that in such “irrelevant” acts God’s Kingdom is made known.

Such a recognition does occur, however, in the midst of a vacation to Canada.

While in Canada, Joe’s life takes a new turn. It starts out in a conversation with a priest named Father Antoine. Father Antoine asks Joe what he does. Joe, traveling in regular clothes, says he is an “office manager” in a “branch office” of a “multinational” concern (327-328). Father Antoine asks Joe if he has heard about the program for late vocations to the priesthood. Joe says he hasn’t, but that it is a thought. He indicates that he is not as concerned about missionary work as he probably should be, and only later tells Father Antoine that he, too, is a priest in good standing. Father Antoine returns to the subject of missionary work, suggesting that one of the most important mission fields—though no longer classified as such—is the United States (331-332).

Before returning to the States, Joe goes to visit a parishioner who had come to Canada in order to avoid the draft (a decision the parishioner had made after talking with Joe). The parishioner is working at a Catholic worker house. Joe ends up spending eleven days working with the poor there, and during that time he gives up alcohol (except for the wine at Mass). When
he leaves to return home, his parishioner, sensing that perhaps Joe has undergone a conversion over the previous several days, urges him to “keep it up.” Joe’s only response is, “We’ll see.” As the novel ends two pages later, however, Joe has decided to “keep it up.” Back in the States, Joe attends a party thrown by friends in his honor. As he leaves the party, he calls back the name of the parish that is his new appointment: Holy Cross.

As Joe Hackett leaves for that new parish, there is a sense that perhaps he has at long last discovered a path to authentic holiness. Joe ends up at the kind of slum parish where as a youth he had guessed he might be able to identify with our Lord. He has lost the sanctimoniousness of his seminary days, and he has left the comfortable alienation of his professional days. Perhaps Father Antoine was unwittingly right in asking Joe about “late vocations to the priesthood.” Joe recovers a sense of vocation through his “conversion” to working with derelicts at the Catholic worker house. But there is only a hint of that, and there is no way of telling, except by speculation, what happens once Joe arrives at his new parish.

The story of Joe Hackett tells a great deal about the problems and pathologies that beset contemporary Christian ministry. As a way of pointing toward the recovery of a ministry of practical wisdom, I want to turn briefly to Ambrose’s account of the ideal character of the clergy.

II. AMBROSE ON THE CLERGY’S CHARACTER

In the late fourth century, in the midst of the post-Constantinian establishment of Christianity, Bishop Ambrose of Milan wrote a treatise on the duties of the clergy entitled De Officiis Ministrorum. Taking as his model Cicero’s De Officiis, Ambrose describes not simply the functions priests ought to perform, but more determinatively the character the clergy ought to have. In contrast to the false alternatives of the Donatist presumption that the clerical office depends upon the character of the person embodying the office and the opposing claim that such character is irrelevant, Ambrose insists that good character is crucial to the fulfillment of the clergy’s vocation.

Ambrose insists that the priestly virtues must be understood eschatologically (i.e., with reference to God’s Kingdom).

But we measure nothing at all but that which is fitting and virtuous, and that by the rule of things future rather than of things present; and we state nothing to be useful but what will help us to the blessing of eternal life; certainly not that which will help us enjoy merely the present time. (1.9.28 [6])

In addition, though the virtues of character are worth striving for in and of themselves, Ambrose suggests that God’s eschatological judgment is a reminder of the importance of good character (1.26.124 [21]).

Such character is learned in part by following the example of wise people who serve as a “mirror of virtue” (1.25.116 [20]). Ambrose refers frequently to various people in the Bible as
examples of how various virtues can be and have been embodied. Of course the paradigmatic example is Jesus Christ. The examples and exhortations of the Bible should inform and shape character, so that “the word of God should come down upon us like the dew” (1.32.165 [28]).

Learning to acquire that character which is patterned in various biblical exemplars, and paradigmatically in Jesus Christ, also requires an ongoing process of training and practice in friendship with those who are wise. The virtues of character revealed in the Scriptures and in the sacraments (3.18.109 [85]) are formed in and through moral training in apprenticeship to wise friends. Indeed Ambrose’s treatise itself is designed to explain the importance of the virtues of character to clergy who have already been formed in those virtues through friendship and moral training.

And I am speaking of the duties which I wish to impress upon and impart to you, whom I have chosen for the service of the Lord; so that those things which have been already implanted and fixed in your minds and characters by habit and training may now be further unfolded to you by explanation and instruction. (2.6.25 [47])

What kind of character, then, is Ambrose seeking to instill in the clergy? The clergy are to have a character that befits their office as ministers of Jesus Christ. The importance of character for the ministerial office, that which serves as a representative focus of a life patterned in Jesus Christ, is manifest in various interrelated components of that office. I will mention three.

First, the office involves ministering at the altar of Christ. Some of Ambrose’s specific prescriptions about what that entails are controversial, including his emphasis on celibacy (so that the office is not “defiled” by conjugal intercourse) and his recommendation that the priest should abstain from wine (so that he may be upheld by the good witness not only of the faithful but also by those who are without). Even so, Ambrose’s concern throughout is that the dignity of the office be maintained so that God can be glorified: “Thus he who sees the minister of the altar adorned with suitable virtues may praise their Author, and reverence the Lord who has such servants” (1.50.256 [41]).

4For example, in a significant shift from Cicero’s account, which sees fame and glory as noble guides, Ambrose insists on the importance of Christ’s humility (3.5.36 [73]).

Second, the office involves teaching and providing counsel. Whatever else the priest does, he is to be a teacher concerned with educating people in the virtues of character (1.1.1 [1]). If he is to teach and counsel people in virtue, the priest needs to embody that virtue himself.

Such, then, ought he to be who gives counsel to another, in order that he may offer himself as a pattern in all good works, in teaching, in trueness of character, in seriousness. Thus his words will be wholesome and irreproachable, his counsel useful, his life virtuous, and his opinions seemly. He must have nothing dark, or deceptive, or false about him, to cast a shadow on his life and character, nothing wicked or evil to keep back those who want advice. (2.17.86, 88 [57])
Or, as Ambrose puts the importance of the clergy’s character in more picturesque terms, “Who seeks for a spring in the mud? Who wants to drink from muddy water?” (2.12.60 [52]). Only a person of character will be equipped to teach and counsel others in the life of virtue and guide them in the path of salvation.

Third, the office involves patronage. Ambrose employs the language of patronage derived from secular understandings of office, but he gives it a specifically Christian content. Whereas, in secular office, personal honor was acquired through the giving of benefactions such as temples, aqueducts, and other public works, for Ambrose, benefactions should be directed toward those in need. He warns that priests should not be wasteful by spending money on “expensive banquets and much wine,” but instead should receive the stranger, clothe the naked, redeem the captives, and help the needy (2.21.109-111 [60]).

All three of these activities are crucial to Ambrose’s understanding of the ministerial office. They cannot and should not be separated. Their successful performance reveals the importance of good character for the priestly office. Hence Ambrose suggests that the clergy “must strive for that wherein is perfection and wherein is truth” (1.48.248 [40]). Ambrose’s emphasis is on perfection understood theologically in terms of the image of God revealed in Jesus Christ (cf. Matt 5:43-48), not perfection as it might be reflected in various cultural or congregational expectations.5

Three themes related to that striving for perfection are worth noting. First, the call to perfection entails a refusal to be entrapped by the “pleasures” of this world, for such seeming pleasures inhibit the development of likeness to God:

And why dost thou build up useless heaps of treasures like spiders’ webs? For though they overflow, they are no good; nay, they denude thee of the likeness of God, and put on thee the likeness of the earthy....Rather cast out of the kingdom of thy soul the likeness of the devil, and raise up the likeness of Christ. (1.49.254 [40])

Moreover, the clergy cannot be entrapped by the pleasures of the world because “raising up the likeness of Christ” involves a way of life that is counter to many prevailing cultural standards. For example, whereas the ambition for glory, money, and power (what the ancients often called “vainglory”) was common in Roman society, Ambrose insists on the importance of humility. The only proper ambition is for the virtues of the office to which the clergy are called—not for either worldly or ecclesiastical success.

Second, the search for perfection requires a disciplined life. Ambrose warns that the clergy need to be careful not only in what they do but also in what they say. In all things they are to reflect the disciplined grace of a virtuous life, for as Ambrose puts it with reference to talking too much, “An overflowing river quickly gathers mud” (1.3.12 [3]).

Third, striving after perfection requires the cultivation of friendships. Ambrose suggests that Christ “gave us a pattern of friendship to follow,” and that friendship is a constitutive factor
of the virtuous life. Ambrose thinks friendship is important not only as amoral apprenticeship for the young, but also as an ongoing means of cultivating and sustaining a person’s character. Interestingly, Ambrose notes that friendships among the poor are generally better than those of the rich, for “true friendship cannot exist where there is lying flattery.” Even so, the most important friendship the clergy are called to have is with God, for in that friendship consists the fullness of virtuous life (3.22.134-136 [89]).

Such is Ambrose’s approach to the question of the clergy’s vocation. His concern is not so much with rules or codes or precepts, nor is it focused on a kind of “role” morality. Rather, in all that the clergy do and in all that they are, they are to show forth a virtuous life which reflects the glory and brightness of the God who has befriended humanity in Jesus Christ. His theological account of the clergy’s character and how that character is formed represents a stark contrast to conformity both to cultural expectations and to presumptions that the clergy are, after all, “only human.”

Even so, Ambrose’s account reflects the time in which it was written. The tensions of the fourth- and fifth-century church are reflected in Ambrose’s arguments about the clergy’s character. Rowan Greer describes those tensions:

A theology of freedom, revolving around a Christianized version of the late antique quest for virtue, predominated in catechetical instruction, in the homilies of the period, and in the theological treatises we possess. On the other hand, the cult of the saints and, in some degree, the holy man as patron appear to have occupied center stage in the corporate and cultic life of the church. That life implied, I think, not a theology of freedom, but one of power.6

Indeed it is in those areas where power is most directly involved that Christian character is most likely to be undermined and/or perverted—whether the issue is hierarchical ordering and patronage within the church or patronage and class distinctions in the wider society. There is no way to avoid issues and relations of power, but the virtues of character delimit the destructive tendencies of power and channel its tendencies into service to communal life.

Greer suggests that problems of power in the clerical office were only beginning to come into focus in the fourth- and fifth-century church. Such problems and tensions form only a subtext in Ambrose’s treatise, but, as Joe Hackett’s life suggests, they have become central problems in our culture. A recovery of a Christian ministry of practical wisdom will have to confront such issues.

Of course, that is easier said than done, and I have not even adequately outlined the problems, much less the solutions. Thus far I have sought to reorient conceptions of the Christian ministry by juxtaposing Joe Hackett’s life and


Ambrose’s account. Even so, it would be mistaken to suggest that either Ambrose or Joe Hackett provides the paradigm for ministry.7 Moreover, it would be unfair to compare a fourth-century bishop’s ideal for the ministry with a twentieth-century fictional account of the joys and griefs of a priest’s daily life and then to suggest that Ambrose had it right and Joe Hackett had it wrong.
Instead, I want to use the account I have developed thus far to indicate how both Ambrose and Joe Hackett point, albeit in different ways, toward a recovery of the clerical office.

III. TOWARD A NONPROFESSIONAL CHRISTIAN MINISTRY OF PRACTICAL WISDOM

One way to characterize the differences between Ambrose and Joe Hackett is in terms of office and profession. Whereas Ambrose’s ideal for Christian clergy is grounded in office, until his conversion Joe Hackett represents a “professionalized” ministry. But why do I characterize the pathologies of Joe’s ministry in terms of profession? After all, the very notion of a “profession” has roots in religious orders, and in its original conception signified a person who had committed his or her whole life to service. Moreover, even contemporary accounts of profession emphasize standards of excellence, advanced study, service to a community, and codes of ethics. Hence it would seem that the clergy have much to gain from being identified as a profession.

In one sense, that is perhaps true. There is something to be gained, as Dennis M. Campbell has argued, from seeing the ministry in relation to a classical understanding of profession. However, in contemporary America the professions are too often identified with a professionalization of upward mobility. Indeed one of the reasons the clergy have been so eager to identify themselves as professionals has been to maintain respect and prestige in comparison to doctors and lawyers, a development that occurs with particular force in late nineteenth-century America.

But rather than transforming a secular notion of profession and giving it a distinctively Christian content, it has been too easy for clergy simply to mirror the standards of other professions—hence Joe Hackett’s decision to present a bill for services rendered, “like doctors and lawyers,” and the all-too-pervasive tendency for pastoral care programs such as Clinical Pastoral Education to be modeled on secular counseling techniques without any theological content.

Moreover, one of the real problems of a professionalized ministry is that it encourages clericalism and its correlative denigration of the laity’s ministry. Professionals in contemporary culture tend to claim authority and power under the illusion of an elitist monopoly of expertise. But the clergy do not have any specialized body of knowledge that sets them above the laity in some kind of hierarchy. The movement is from God...
to the community to the office, not God to the office to the community. The clergy are given the power to celebrate the sacraments, to preach the gospel, and to order the institution. In so doing, however, they are also to embody the virtues of holiness, to assist others in the pursuit of holiness (including the clergy ministering to people in their respective vocations), and to cultivate and build up the community. The clergy thus have considerable power; but it ought to be a power manifest in service to others, whereas in contemporary America it too easily becomes manifest in an assertion of privilege and status associated with particular forms of expertise.

A nonprofessional ministry of practical wisdom needs to recover the power of the gospel—in Joe Hackett’s terms, the power of the cross—rather than relying on the power of a profession. A life shaped by the power of the cross enables others to glimpse something of the glory of God and move them along on the path of holy living. The ministry is not simply a “helping profession,” nor is it simply avocation for activating people in this or that cause. It is an office whereby people are set aside to assist and direct people in service to God’s Kingdom.

Recovering such a sense of office, however, also requires recovering a sense of the moral formation that Ambrose indicates is so important for that office. It requires a refusal to be entrapped by the pleasures of the world, whether those pleasures are characterized in terms of money and ambition or comfort and status. It requires the discipline to care for what is done as well as what is said. Ambrose’s reminder that “an overflowing river quickly gathers mud” suggests the importance of avoiding distractions. The clergy ought not to be too busy for prayer and worship, Bible study and work in soup kitchens.

A nonprofessional Christian ministry of practical wisdom also entails the accompaniment of friends who help to provide formation in wise judgment. Insofar as authentic Christian communities are like Joe Hackett’s flying saucers, often reported but rarely if ever sighted, it will be difficult to cultivate such friendships. It may mean that the clergy’s task of embodying virtue and guiding others in the path of virtue will include radical witness and renewal.

Such a task does not rest simply with the clergy, however, or perhaps even primarily with them. The people who set aside the clergy and are the recipients of their ministry bear the responsibility of asking the clergy not simply to be professionals, but to be persons of character who enable witness to God’s gracious Kingdom. Even a minister who wants to reclaim a sense of office will be frustrated if she does not have the support of communal and institutional contexts which make that office intelligible.

Communities that do manifest this support are undoubtedly not quite as rare as flying saucers, though Joe Hackett’s fear is real. Perhaps the friendships necessary for ministries of practical wisdom will be discovered in places like Holy Cross, among the poor and in the inner city. Perhaps they will be found in other new and renewed communities brought together by the cross of Christ. But one thing is certain: such friendships aren’t likely to be found in the mud in which so many people find themselves mired.

Ambrose suggests that God’s eschatological judgment will keep people out of the mud and in the pursuit of good character. The loss of an eschatological focus and any sense of God’s judgment in contemporary culture, even or perhaps especially within Christian communities, makes the recovery of the ministerial office particularly complex. It is not simply the difficulty that many people are mired in mud, but the even greater problem that people are
unaware that they are so mired. No one is likely to turn to such people for a spring of counsel or for the waters of salvation.

But there is hope even for those mired in mud. The title of Powers’ novel about Joe Hackett, *Wheat That Springeth Green*, is taken from a hymn whose allusions go back to John 12:24. The hymn suggests that love returns “that with the dead has been,” just as the wheat “that in dark earth many days has lain” comes back to life as a “green blade.” The hymn serves as a reminder that even in the midst of a professionalized ministry buried in the mud, there is hope for a resurrected sense of the office and character to which the clergy are called. For Christians, who “profess” to witness to the God who has promised to bring the Kingdom in its fullness, there is no reason to hope for anything less.

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