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## Nonviolent Communication: A Foundational Skill for Ministry

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**ABSTRACT:**

A need for more formation has been identified during the continental phase of the Synod on Synodality. Furthermore, a conference of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative has observed a lack of time devoted to nonviolence in existing Catholic formation. This paper will demonstrate how incorporating Nonviolent Communication (NVC) into formation will meet these needs.

# Nonviolent Communication

## A Foundational Skill for Ministry

*by Mary L Parks*

### INTRODUCTION

A need for more formation has been identified during the continental phase of the Synod on Synodality.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, despite the nonviolent emphasis of the ministry of Jesus, a conference of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative has observed a lack of time devoted

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1 Secretaria Generalis Synodi, “Enlarge the space of your tent” (*Is 54:2*), *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, (Vatican City, 2022).



to nonviolence in existing Catholic formation.<sup>2</sup> Formation of Catholic ministers needs to include instruction in nonviolent communication (NVC) because compassion is necessary for pastoral care, and pastoral care is foundational to all contexts within ministry. This paper will demonstrate how knowledge of NVC will form compassionate ministers by first presenting a theology of compassionate communication and then considering some of the obstacles to such communication. The principals of NVC will then be outlined, and examples of how NVC can be used in ministerial contexts will be provided.

## THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION IN MINISTRY

Communication is a demonstration of theology; communication reflects deeply held assumptions about God and humanity. If a minister believes that all people are beloved children of God, for example, it will be apparent in the way the minister interacts with others.

Communication is not just about content; it is about relationship: “At its most profound level it is giving of self in love,” and it brings us into communion with others.<sup>3</sup> A pastoral minister’s goal is to be present to people in whatever they are going through and to communicate God’s love through the message, “I receive, respect, and dignify you.”

Listening is the first step to compassionate communication in ministry. Such listening is intentional and becomes a spiritual disposition; it requires the humility to receive the gifts another person shares through their story. Humility is especially important when the other person’s story differs significantly from one’s own. With humility and intentional listening, the minister communicates to the other person that they are received and dignified, wherever they are at in the present moment, and that they belong in the Kingdom of God. Pope Francis explained the significance of this type of listening:

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2 Terrence Rynne, “New Rome Conference on Gospel Nonviolence Could Serve as Push for Papal Encyclical,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/new-rome-conference-gospel-nonviolence-could-serve-push-papal-encyclical>.

3 Vatican II. *Communio et Progressio*. (Vatican City, 1971) sec. 11.

We all have ears, but many times even those with perfect hearing are unable to hear another person. In fact, there is an interior deafness worse than the physical one. Indeed, listening concerns the whole person, not just the sense of hearing. The true seat of listening is the heart. . . With the awareness that we participate in a communion that precedes and includes us, we can rediscover a symphonic Church, in which each person is able to sing with his or her own voice, welcoming the voices of others as a gift to manifest the harmony of the whole that the Holy Spirit composes.<sup>4</sup>

With compassionate listening, the minister is able to demonstrate an openness to dialogue. The documents promulgated at Vatican II demonstrate such openness to dialogue. *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, for example, states: “For the ties which unite the faithful together are stronger than those which separate them; let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything.”<sup>5</sup> It is by maintaining an openness to dialogue that the minister encourages communication that can be transformative instead of explosive.

## OBSTACLES TO COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION IN MINISTRY

The pastoral minister is present to others in whatever they are experiencing. Often the other feels broken and alone. By communicating God’s love compassionately, the minister facilitates the other’s restoration to wholeness and right relationship with God. Nevertheless, there are significant obstacles to compassionate communication in ministry.

One obstacle is the variety of presuppositions with which individuals, including ministers, arrive to the interaction. All theology is based on such presuppositions and can vary dramatically from one individual to another. Examples of different presuppositions include high vs. low Christology, which effects an individual’s view of the incarnation, and high vs. low anthropology, which effects an individual’s view of

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4 Francis, *World Communications Day* (Vatican City, 2022).

5 Vatican II, *Guadium et spes* (Vatican City, 1965), sec. 92.

humanity. Education based on different forms of Biblical criticism, such as historical criticism and literary criticism (which can lead to an understanding of Scripture that is either literal or poetic) further contributes to diverse perspectives. Personal life experiences also contribute significantly to an individual's presuppositions; a lay woman or person from another non-elite group will often have a different perspective than an ordained white man.

Such varied perspectives will result in tension, which can cause individuals to feel uncomfortable and may lead to conflict. But tension within community is healthy and natural. Healthy tension is demonstrated by the four Gospels; each Gospel relates the story of Jesus from a different perspective, yet all four come together within the Church to form a cohesive whole. As a leader within the community, the minister is in a position to demonstrate non-judgmental acceptance of all of God's children, as well as a willingness to engage in dialogue.

In addition to the tension felt naturally within community, each member of the community is subject to tension within themselves. Inner tension is often unconscious and results in part from Platonism's strong influence within the Church. Platonism divides the material world from the spiritual world and suggests that the spiritual world is superior to the material world. The resulting denial of earthly reality causes some individuals to reject their own experience, which can be detrimental in terms of spiritual, mental, and physical health. Self-rejection may also lead to a defensiveness that prevents constructive dialogue with others. An individual must be able to move from self-rejection to self-compassion before they are able to have compassion for others.

Tension between official Church teachings and the radically inclusive message of the Gospels is another obstacle to compassionate communication. Some Church teachings, such as restricting access to the Eucharist, can be seen as hurtful and exclusive. Ministers are faced with the challenge of being faithful to doctrine while also providing pastoral care. As observed by Pope Francis, the gap between doctrine and pastoral care can be hard to reconcile:

At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance.<sup>6</sup>

Presuppositions, tension between and within individuals, and the seemingly conflicting priorities of remaining faithful to doctrine and providing pastoral care are only a few of the obstacles to compassionate communication in ministry. All ministers deserve formation that will enable them to face such obstacles successfully.

## NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION AND ITS APPLICATION TO MINISTRY

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is based on the principle of nonviolence, which posits that all people are compassionate by nature, and that violent strategies are learned behaviors. According to NVC, we all share the same basic needs, and all behavior is an attempt to satisfy unmet needs. Behaviors are sometimes based on violent strategies that include harming another through the way we communicate. Harm caused through communication is not always conscious and may include judging, blaming, or being defensive. Through a combination of empathic listening and honest expression, NVC presents an alternative to meeting needs through harmful communication.

NVC is a 4-step process involving making observations, naming feelings, stating needs, and making or hearing direct requests. In NVC, all participants are responsible for communication: emphatic listening and honest expression are equally important components of the process. NVC is not a strict formula for speaking, but a way of understanding interactions.

NVC promotes understanding and connection through conscious use of language. Students of NVC learn about communication that blocks connection, including making moralistic judgements, making comparisons, and denying responsibility. Students also learn to make observations without evaluation, and to identify, express, and take responsibility for feelings. Another emphasis of NVC is the existence of

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6 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (Vatican City, 2016), sec. 311.

universal human needs such as connection, physical well-being, honesty, play, peace, autonomy and meaning. Once students understand the reality of universal human needs, they are more able to connect compassionately with themselves, and to hear the needs behind the feelings expressed by others.

NVC skills are useful for any context in which a minister seeks to promote unity or communicate God's mercy. Examples of NVC in ministry include:

Listening empathically to another's story, and allowing space for their feelings,

Respecting the other as a "Believer," *i.e.*, someone who has responded in faith to God's invitation to relationship, even though the other may not fit into a specific religious mold,

Allowing space for another person's experience of religion, especially when that experience has been traumatic,

Relating to another in their own language, instead of talking down to them or speaking in a language that they are unable to hear,

Recognizing the possibility of healing in another person's life,

Seeing a need for connection as the reason behind a community member's resistance to change, and

Considering the possible impact of words before speaking about Church doctrine.

With an understanding of NVC gained in formation, ministers will be equipped to provide compassionate pastoral care to community members in a variety of otherwise challenging situations.

## CONCLUSION

Theology and communication are integrally involved, intertwined, and interconnected. The way the minister communicates their theology is as important as the content of their theology. Communication is not just handing on data; it is an encounter involving being open, listening, and relating. God communicates with human beings through Revelation, and God invites people to enter their full potential as communicative beings. Through compassionate communication practices, the minister extends the gift of self that has been offered to them by God.

Effective formation is wholistic, addressing each person's emotions, imagination, will, heart, and mind: "It is the whole person who ministers, so the whole person is the proper subject of formation."<sup>7</sup> Critical elements of wholistic formation include effective relationship and communications skills, change and conflict management skills, and the ability to discern the signs of the times. By incorporating NVC into ministerial formation, the Church will meet the general need for increased formation, as well as the specific need for training in nonviolence, empowering ministers to communicate compassionately with the People of God.



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7 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), 33.



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