

The Priest and Home Visitation

Author(s): John Durkan

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The Priest and Home Visitation

John Durkan

Home visitation is part of a priest's pastoral care of the people in his charge. It is something that shouldn't be left *ar an méar fada* simply because it demands discipline and dedication. It is an exercise which underlies and underpins much of the rest of the activity of a priest in a parish.

Many documents have highlighted the importance of visitation, none more than the Code of Canon Law. Canon 529 §1 states: 'So that he may fulfil his office of pastor diligently, the parish priest is to strive to know the faithful entrusted to his care. He is therefore to visit their families, sharing in their cares and anxieties and, in a special way, their sorrows, comforting them in the Lord.'¹

Various Pastoral Directories concur and spell out a little bit more what might be involved. The Diocese of Ossory's *Parish Pastoral Directory* states:

A systematic pastoral visitation of homes is an indispensable instrument of pastoral care and is not to be equated with a mere social calling on people. This enables the priest to get to know his people and their concerns. An active ministry of presence, where the Church becomes visible by going into the homes of people including those who feel alienated and estranged, becomes the touchstone for effective ministry. The ministry of the priest in his parish is as much one of compassion as it is one of conversion. The more the Church is brought into the homes of her sons and daughters, the more likely they are to bring themselves into the house of God. It is through a ministry of compassionate presence that the more explicit proclamation of the Word becomes possible. Home visitation is therefore at the very heart of evangelisation. Every parish should have some form of regular programme for calling on parishioners or engaging in home visitation. Priests should make it a priority to visit a certain

1. *The Code of Canon Law*, English translation (Dublin: Collins, 1983).

John Durkan is a priest of the diocese of Achonry. Address: The Presbytery, Ballaghaderreen, County Roscommon.

THE FURROW

number of homes each year and if possible each week. The very vast majority of people appreciate being visited by their priest. Each priest should have a register of the people in the area of the parish assigned to him.²

This article will give a biblical foundation and some theological reflection upon visitation of homes by a priest. Then it will say a few words about the link between visitation and preaching. Finally the experience I have had myself, for what it is worth, will be expressed in the hope that this will encourage the faint-hearted priest – if such there be.

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

There is a Hebrew word *pakhad* which expresses the idea of God visiting his people. In Exodus 13:19 we read: 'Moses took the body of Joseph with him, as Joseph had made the Israelites solemnly promise to do. Joseph had said, "When God visits you, you must carry my body with you from this place".' It is interesting to note that the modern *Good News Bible*³ translates the word 'visit' here by 'rescue'. There is a whole theology of God visiting by rescuing and rescuing by visiting his people which is found throughout the Old Testament. Jeremiah cries out in 15:15 'Visit me and help me.' He is calling on the Lord to come to his aid and the word is also translated as 'remember me' in some Bibles.

So the word *pakhad* is a strong word, a strong type of visiting that wants what's best for the person visited and signals that that person or group is being kept in mind by God. That's the kind of visitation that God does.

In some texts of the Bible this word has an official, serious kind of nuance which suggests visiting with a point and not just calling in for a chat. There was too much at stake, too much to lose.

The word *pakhad* has too the connotation of appointing people when you visit, empowering them to act and being with them as a strong presence.

Jesus is the best example of God's visiting his people. It was no longer just the word of God or one of his messengers but God himself who was visiting. This wasn't lost on the characters in the gospels. We read in Luke 7:16, where Jesus raises up the widow of Nain's son: 'They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us!" they said; "God has come to visit his people!"'

This is the way Jesus acted and lived. He never wanted to stay

2. *A Parish Pastoral Directory*, edited by William Dalton, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1996).

3. *Good News Bible – Catholic Edition* (Glasgow: The Bible Societies/Harper Collins, 1994).

THE PRIEST AND HOME VISITATION

in one place but moved on to all the places he wanted to visit. Mark 2:38 makes this quite clear. 'Jesus answered them: "We must go on to the other villages around here. I have to preach in them also, because that is why I came." So he travelled all over Galilee, preaching in their towns and driving out demons.'

This text is interesting in many ways not least in the fact that Jesus set out to preach to these people. Later on in this article I will try to give some insights into the way preaching and visiting of houses fit together and feed into each other. Jesus uses the word 'must' here. He has to do it. He was 'sent' to do this and it's the only reason given here for his mission. We are told that he travelled all over Galilee. He went to Judah as well in the south of the Holy Land and eventually to Jerusalem.

In the Gospel we see a Jesus very interested in the anxieties, cares and sorrows of his people. It was always the person made to feel small and unimportant that he helped and healed. As priests we all need to realise that there are many people in our parishes who have been consigned to the rubbishheap of society and visited, maybe, only at pre-election time. It is an important question all priests need to ask themselves – do we visit these kinds of people? The ones that Jesus spent time with like the woman at the well, the centurions and tax-collectors – these are the ones that we so easily neglect.

Jesus too talked about the sinners. In fact he said that he was a kind of GP, who went out in search of these people. He ate with them and was disliked because he was seen mixing with them. It was the religious leaders of the day who seemed to be most put out by this as if they knew that somehow they should be doing what he was doing. The sinner and the sin were abhorred and people walked by on the other side.

That's always the temptation for a priest in the parish. To neglect those who are neglected by everybody else, to mix with those who are well off. Not that these last-named people don't need our care. In some ways they need it very badly. And it all involves a death to self which is hard and is tied up with the Paschal Mystery.

HOME VISITATION AND PREACHING

There is a real connection between visiting houses and families and preaching the Word of God. It has to be a word for our time and for our people. The Eucharist is a celebration of God being with his people but also a celebration of what is happening in our community. And for the Eucharist to bring about the unity it signifies there has to be real community. M. Scott Peck has often talked about the lack of real community in churches and groups of

THE FURROW

people united for a religious purpose; ‘Wherever I go, the one constant I (Scott Peck speaking) have found is the lack of and thirst for community. This lack and thirst is particularly heart-breaking in those places where one might expect to find real community – in churches.’⁴

We all long for real community. We are made in the image and likeness of God. God is a community of person and we want to be wanted, to be cherished and made to feel at home. There are so many who do not feel wanted, who actually (if we spoke the truth) are not wanted. These people are looking for real community where often there isn’t in fact any.

The kingdom of God is the Good News Jesus came to give to us. We realize that it will never come about in all its fullness, that the poor we will always have with us and that sin is real and hard to eradicate. So we will never have real community where everyone is loved and accepted. But we are called to help create community and be involved in setting up the kingdom of God.

It is so important that people are cherished for what they are. It is sad if people feel unwanted and not cared for. There will be people who are not on speaking terms with others. They should be visited too. In every group of people there will inevitably be some who are estranged from others. Life is difficult and the way we rub against one another can lead to conflict and bitterness. The priest arrives into this situation and offers the Good News of reconciliation. He will be listened to in the measure that he shows respect for all in his care and sees them as part of God’s family. They may not be a great community but they are all God’s children. This is a truth that we are too glib about. It applies to the North of Ireland and everywhere. It is very consoling truth. It is a truth the priest has to believe and live out in the way he relates to his parishioners.

How do you get people to open themselves to the word of God and what it means? By going into their house, getting past the dog, looking at the photo albums they show you and listening to their fears and their problems. Then they may say, ‘This man is another Jesus. It’s refreshing to know that he cares about me, that he knows my name, that he came to see me when I was sick and that he saw the cat that was sick the day he came. Surely that’s the way Jesus cared about people in his time. When I find that a priest visits me, it dawns on me that God must care after all. If he stays for a while to talk to me, then I get the chance to ask him about things I don’t understand very well. If I learn to trust him then I can begin to think about pouring out my heart to him and letting him know my fears.’

4. *The Different Drum*, M. Scott Peck (Reading, UK: Arrow Books, 1987). It is worth reading this entire section of the book.

THE PRIEST AND HOME VISITATION

Preaching is all about explaining the Word of God to the people and making it relevant to their lives. If the priest doesn't know about their lives and about their cats or cows that are sick, then it may not become relevant at all. Worse still it may become irrelevant and the people will stop listening to the priest. We tend to listen to the people we know and respect. Those we have come to really love can't say a word we won't remember. So there is a link between preaching and visiting people. One feeds into the other. People do remember words said in the pulpit that are meant. If the words are meant then the visits must have been too.

Communication is at the heart of community-building and communication is about listening. If I can listen to the people then I can know their needs. They want to know that they are being listened to. They want to know that what they say is important. It's not easy for a priest to listen. It involves a death, a death of what I'd like and it is painful. Where else can I get a chance to listen to the people if I don't go to their houses? If they come to see me in my house, I can't promise them that I'll have time. The phone may ring, the doorbell go and before we know it the next meeting I have to go to has arrived. If someone comes to the confessional box I can't promise that I'll be able to listen for long – the next person in the queue gets restless and the whole thing has to be called off for another time, 'another time' which never comes. In the church, few come to the sacristy, and even fewer say much there. So lack of visitation leads to lack of communication. And that can be deadly for community.

The Church in our time is being asked to be the listening Church. That is one of the main reasons for visiting people. So that they can be consulted and what they say valued as important. If I listen long and hard to the people then, after a while, they will begin to listen to me. I will be no longer speaking in a vacuum. A real relating will be going on.

In his visitation of a parish every priest finds situations of unlove, bitterness, unforgiveness and conflict. This is going to happen anyway and God's grace works through us all in these situations. We are called as priests to bring God's love and forgiveness to all our people and to help them to bring it to one another. To be able to reconcile conflict and hate is one of the most fulfilling and rewarding things a priest can do. But it comes at a price. It costs more than any of us imagine and the cross is present in all these situations.

MY OWN EXPERIENCE

In the parish I work in, I began about a year ago to visit all the houses. The thing that struck me most was how welcoming the

THE FURROW

people were. There was no home I wasn't made to feel welcome in. Some really were delighted to see a priest arriving. Most of them couldn't have been kinder to me and I found it hard to get away from many of the houses.

I suppose that those living on their own were happiest of all with my visit to them. It was a chance for them to talk about their lives and fill me in about their families. Some of them do not get many visits from the neighbours round about which is becoming the trend more and more. This is sad and maybe the priest's visiting these people will help reverse this trend.

The people I visited do see the priest as a man of God. That struck me very forcibly. He is seen to be a man of prayer and they are pleased that he is taking an interest in them. Some of them said to me that they were very glad that I was visiting them and named people I should visit more often. Others were afraid that I might overlook them so they actually invited me just in case.

One proud mother told me about a motorised go-kart her son had made. When I expressed interest in this she asked him to show it to me. It was great to be able to affirm a person like that.

These few thoughts may help priests to put even greater effort into visiting homes. All my experiences in this area have been positive and I hope and pray the same will apply to all who are encouraged to visit parishioners more often.

Living stones. Ireland is a land of many ruins. Ruins are not empty. They are sacred places full of presence. A friend of mine, a priest in Connemara, was going to build a car-park outside his church. There was a ruin nearby which had been vacated for fifty or sixty years. He went to the man whose family had lived there long ago. He asked the man to give him the stones for the foundation. The man refused. The priest asked why and the man said: '*Céard a dhéanfadh anamacha mo mhuintire ansin?*' i.e. what would the souls of my ancestors do then? The implication was that even in this ruin long since vacated, the souls of those who had once lived there still had a particular affinity and attachment to this place. The life and passion of a person leave an imprint on the ether of a place. Love does not remain within the heart, it flows out to build secret tabernacles in a landscape.

—JOHN O'DONOHUE, *Anam Cara* (Bantam Press, London) p. 41