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When Values and Ethics of Care Conflict: A Lived Experience in the Roman Catholic Church

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Abstract

This article investigates contemporary understandings of the ethics of care. While the ethics of care is predominantly known as showing empathy and support to others, analysing the complex relationship between institutional and personal values of clerical leaders and the congregation in the Roman Catholic Church in England reveals very different understandings. The sociological and psychological concepts of authority, pastoral care and identity are used to analyse the role of a female youth work leader in a Roman Catholic parish who is exposed to different (conservative and liberal) leadership approaches. She explains how her views on care, gender and participation differ from those of three clerical leaders and powerfully illustrates the resulting conflicts between the priests but also towards the congregation. This story shows that individual agency influences strong conservative institutional values and that leadership in faith-based organisations needs to embrace the complex interplay between institutional and personal dynamics.

Keywords

ethics of care, gender, identity, leadership, pastoral care, pastoral power, Roman Catholic Church

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Introduction

Leadership in faith-based organisations is arguably complex because clerical leaders do not only have to navigate through diffuse power structures, due to the multitude of stakeholder interests, but also have to balance theological values with secular trends (Grandy, 2013; Hardy and Ballis, 2005). Values inform normative behaviour (Selznick, 1957) and this article illustrates how the interplay of institutional and personal values generates incongruent perceptions relating to the ethics of care by leaders and followers, which, in turn, result in conflict and resistance. A starting point of the ethics of care is a philosophical perspective emphasising ‘the importance of attentiveness, empathy, responsiveness and responsibility for others’ (Gabriel, 2015: 317).

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest institutions in the world and the largest Christian denomination. Its strong hierarchical structure stretches from local parish priests, who possess considerable institutional power, through a network of bishops at provinces and dioceses (O’Collins, 2010). However, the Catholic Church has also long subscribed to the notion of delegation of operational decision-making to the local level which, more recently, has been accelerated by wider societal trends fostering greater involvement of lay members, including women (Lamb, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2013). This contrast makes the Catholic Church an interesting context to analyse how personal values shape the different interpretations of institutional values of those with formal authority (priests) and lay members (parishioners). The inclusion of the laity in decision-making might be perceived by more traditional clergy as an institutional contradiction and lead to power struggles and leadership conflict (Creed et al., 2010).

At a local level, pastoral authority is given to priests by their bishop to care for members of the flock. In general, pastoral care is seen by many as the demonstration of compassion and empathy with the intention of helping individuals (Poling, 1984). Yet, the Catholic Church has developed over the centuries a distinctive view of pastoral care, which uses the imagery of the shepherd’s crook as much as a symbol of discipline and control as empathetic support (Foucault, 1994).

This article gives voice to Esther, a female youth work leader, who is both a follower and a lay leader in close contact with leaders (priests) and the congregation in the parish. Her story is analysed to illustrate how institutional values, mixed with societal and personal values, lead to different understandings of the ethics of care in the contemporary Roman Catholic Church in England with incisive consequences for all actors involved. With a focus on the distinct value sets of the different actors, Esther’s story also enriches feminist studies reflecting on identity conflicts of women in faith-based organisations (e.g. Madden et al., 2015).

Esther has worked in the parish for more than a decade and in her narrative, she movingly talks about her call to work with young people and about the desire to make a meaningful contribution to the church. Her narrative shows that she pursues strong caring values with the aim of supporting the well-being and flourishing of others (Simola, 2015). She feels strongly her identity within the Catholic faith but struggles with the value-sets she sees in the three priests with very distinct personalities who currently work in her parish.

In this parish, the priests work in different churches on a rotating basis. The division of pastoral governance provides the ground for stark contrasts in discourse and even

competition between the priests (Foucault, 2007). Their different values and belief systems about the role of individual followers within the institutional system (Creed et al., 2010) and about the way institutional values should be interpreted, cause power struggles between them. The division of governance also prevents the establishment of in-depth relationships with followers. Similar to Waring and Latif's (2017) findings, Esther's story shows how the priests compete for their 'regimes of truth', with each of them influencing the congregation differently.

The priests' attitudes are reflected in their styles of leadership: Fr Clemens is the senior priest within the parish and has adopted a soft democratic style. He shares responsibility with two other priests, Fr Amos and Fr Albert. Fr Amos seems to display a broadly conservative view of priesthood, in relation to forms of address and priestly authority (Louden and Francis, 2003). Fr Albert is seen as also caring passionately about priestly authority and liturgical details such as the kind of religious art displayed. Fr Amos and Fr Albert exercise traditional power embedded in their role (Creed et al., 2010) that is characterised by not sharing power with laity. Esther's story shows that this way of leading is not accepted by all followers.

As it happens, both priests had converted to Catholicism from the Anglican Church. Their behaviour towards Esther and the congregation almost certainly reflects some of the attitudes to authority and gender issues which led them to leave the Anglican Church in the first place. Research on identity suggests that both Fr Albert and Fr Amos experienced a mismatch between personal and social identities in the Anglican Church (Kreiner et al., 2006) and changed to Catholicism hoping for an alignment in values around the role of women and the laity. It seems that their 'idealised' understanding of Catholicism, unmarked by the transformative perspectives on lay involvement introduced by the Second Vatican Council, stands in contrast to recent developments in the Catholic Church around collegiality, shared ministry and a less authoritarian approach (Gagne, 2020; Tataryn, 2013). Their understanding of priestly authority, pastoral care and the role of women and laity in the Roman Catholic Church differs from reality in this local parish and might be perceived as institutional contradiction (Creed et al., 2010). Their leadership styles appear to reflect this tension, as the relationship between them and the congregation is marked by strong resistance. Harvey (2018) shows that Catholic priests maintain their anti- or pro-women attitudes via patterned everyday identity.

In practice, Esther exercises functional power as a lay leader and expects a high level of personal involvement and power to be shared. Clearly, she does not present an unqualified acceptance of the priest as a dominant authority figure. In her view, church leadership is to be shared with followers. Esther thus talks about how difficult it is for some priests to accept this newer form of participation, confirming O'Keeffe's (2000) observation that many priests are confused about this change, which seems to undermine their authority and power.

It is further evident that all actors have developed different understandings of the ethics of care: for Esther, care is about empathy, attentiveness and responsibility for others (Gabriel, 2015), while Fr Amos and Fr Albert seem to understand it as *caring about* the institution rather than *caring for* the people. They present an authoritarian understanding of pastoral care and so, in Esther's opinion, fail to display the leadership qualities expected. Esther describes how little these two priests seem to care about the congregation and

actively object to any initiatives within the church community. Gherardi and Rodeschini (2015) suggest this kind of behaviour is seen as caring as a duty rather than caring as a compassionate human relationship. The low self-esteem of some of the priests, as suggested by Esther, perhaps pushes them into defensive positions against the high expectations of some of their followers. The differences in understanding may have emerged from personal and institutional values and lead to an obvious incongruence in understandings of caring leadership (Abreu Pederzini, 2019).

To understand further the reasons for this tension, analysis is needed of the way women are integrated into the institutional structures of the Roman Catholic Church. Esther's story demonstrates how stereotypes of male leadership originating from traditional Christian thought dominate the perception of the two priests. On various occasions, Esther feels a victim of gender bias in a 'power game' caught within a patriarchal context. Despite the pressure from Fr Amos and Fr Albert to conform to conventional gender roles, Esther has developed a more reflective ethical position for dealing with the different clergy (Puka, 1989). She shows a strong personal identity filled with moral and psychological courage because she has navigated a way through situations of unethical practice as she relates these to the weaknesses and flaws of the clergy (Osswald et al., 2010). Esther's perception of gendered norms in the church suggests she experiences difficulty in establishing her authority in this particular parish. This article contributes to previous research on conventional resistance to the erosion of patriarchal power (Smolović Jones et al., 2020) as we found overt resistance of the priests in accepting Esther as a female lay leader.

The result of this mix of institutional, personal and theological values is a clash in the relationships between all involved. The priests' leadership style and understanding of pastoral care does not fit to the expectations of Esther and the congregation. Esther describes with some feeling that other members of the congregation similarly show awareness of the underlying conflict within the clergy team, and that they, too, respond with strong opposition to the tension generated, even reporting some of the priests to the Bishop. Esther talks about the damage these power struggles have caused between the priests, other lay leaders and the congregation, and the degree of healing that is now needed.

Because of this dissonance, Foucault (2007) suggests that followers return to scripture as a foundational reference point. This is certainly evident in the reaction of Esther as she attempts to bypass the local institution and return to a more direct relationship with God to balance the tensions between her personal and the social gender identity (Kreiner et al., 2006). Apparently, Esther's personal identity is not shaken by the traditional institutional notion of who or what she should be as in the opinion of the two priests (Creed et al., 2010). Her reflexive efforts on maintaining a strong sense of self-identity as well as her position in this specific social arena cohere with other research on identity work (Trusson et al., 2020).

Overall, Esther's story demonstrates the uncomfortable reality of dissonance in pastoral relationships as formal institutions with established sets of values and beliefs are challenged by personal and wider societal values. Her narrative contributes to the uncovering of the interactive exchange between these value-systems, which is not limited to the church setting, and invites reflection on the implications for other contemporary workplace settings (Redient-Collot, 2009).

Esther's story

Esther's deep calling to care

It was about 12 years ago when I joined the church and found my faith. I felt a calling to serve the church, I felt a very deep calling to work with young people. I am the youth work leader. It is hugely rewarding. It is a relationship you build with people, especially young people. It gives me a lot of life to see them grow and question. It is such a joy to be part of that journey with them, not just in their faith but also in their life.

It helps me with my faith as well. My faith has grown through the work I have done. I put myself in the shoes of a follower all the time. I am one, but I also recognise that I am privileged to work for the church, that the way I look at things is different from that of the average parishioner. I feel that my role is to remind the priest about the perspective of the real people in the church.

I am a completely different person to who I was 12 years ago. The way I look at the ministries has completely changed, my understanding of it and in terms of the skills that I have developed as well – developing the language of the church, understanding and using it better. So obviously, I have developed a lot, also in terms of learning how to talk to the priests. I got better at sussing out how much I can say, how much I cannot say, how I should say it. You need to play that game a little bit because they are different, there is no formula for priests. I wanted to move beyond just being a youth work leader and I felt I can contribute a lot more. Especially because I have done my Master's in theology and I felt that I got a good understanding of the vision of the family ministry and of the bigger picture, and youth ministry is a major part of that and it was my motivation, but I needed more.

I think priests should be shepherds. They should be someone who cares very much about every person in the church. I am not sure if that actually happens. I think they are a very important cog in the machine, but we are all the church. I think that is why they change things in the Vatican, too. It is no longer just a priest. They no longer have to do mass on their own. People should be there because we are all the church. They have to change the language; they have to face the people.

I have noticed that some lay leaders just do not want to talk to priests at all, partly because they have been burnt in the past by the priest. I can understand why they would not, but I think we should also keep the priest informed. I mean, that is the thing I am frustrated with, I would like to tell the priest what I am doing, I do not need their permission. I do not really care about the priests as an authority figure of the church compared with other people who do, but I would like to keep them informed because that is a way of gaining their support.

Esther's experience with different clerical leaders

I found it very hard to manage all three priests because they have three completely different personalities. They are human beings, but they have their own opinion, they all have a different ideology. Although they are all part of the same church, their view of what the church is, is different. For Fr Clemens, church is people, congregation. For Fr Albert, it is the building. For Fr Amos, it is the liturgy and priest and what he wears.

They did not get on well together. There was a major power struggle between them, especially when Fr Amos was here. There was a major problem that they just did not get on well at all. Amos and Albert would always work together against Clemens, but, actually, they did not like each other at all. With the disunity among the clergy, it was just getting difficult.

Fr Clemens

Fr Clemens was a huge influence, and we had a good relationship. He has been a massive support. He cares very much about me as a person and my development. He let me try things. Generally, if a parishioner is positive and energetic, he likes that and he allows them to try things. We used to see each other all the time. The only one who really had an impact was Fr Clemens. He was so gentle. He was a person who would allow you to be who you are. He was just a quiet, steady support for all these years. He was somebody I could talk to. He was a friend. He has been very supportive, but he did not quite have the skills and the courage to challenge Fr Amos and Fr Albert.

Fr Clemens has a higher authority, but they did not respect him at all. His health went. He became quite ill. He found it exhausting. It took a lot out of him, and it was horrible to witness it over the years. It felt a little bit like bullying to me. He would never say that. He is far too humble to say that, but it was not great.

He struggled a lot because there were a lot of loud, persistent voices in the parish, not only from the priests, but parishioners as well, and I think he found it hard to challenge them at the right time, he struggled with that a lot. So, his natural reaction was to avoid conflict altogether. He could not deal with complaints; he was not very good at management. In terms of leadership, he let you do things, so it is a great quality to be able not to micro-manage everything, but he also needed to manage sometimes, and he never did. Fr Clemens was probably more of a people leader. People were desperate for him to lead, to just give them a vision. Some kind of positive message like 'I want to focus on this'. He just did not do it.

He wanted every priest to be part of the team and travel around, but the problem with travelling around at masses is that you do not actually get to know anybody. So, other than the core people in each church, the ones who are doing things, he did not get to know anybody. So, that was a kind of failed model of a community, but it depends what we think the role of a priest is in the community. Is the community a congregation and is the priest just there to serve in mass? Does he have a specific role in the community or is he the community? I think he wanted the people to be in the community, to have the community sense, but I do not think he ever saw himself as the centre of all that.

He did not have anyone supporting. There were times when he was honest and he would say: 'I am really struggling with this'. This obviously changed the way I looked at Amos and Albert early on before I had a problem with them personally. I saw the way they were behaving with Fr Clemens. It is just not right.

That was probably the saddest thing: they [the priests] would not engage at all with the community. They have been invited to numerous things over the years and on occasion Fr Clemens would go to something, but very rarely. He was overloaded and the last thing, in terms of priority, just fell off the list because he could barely cope with what he had.

Fr Amos and Fr Albert

I used to work with Fr Amos, but things turned quite nasty. He ultimately had a problem with my role. I have a feeling that it has something to do with the fact that I was a woman. He had a real problem with that. In terms of respecting, he did not really.

In the end, it became about power and the role, because they just did not like the role. They did not like the fact that, when you are a youth worker, you can kind of work independently. They have nothing to do with youth groups, they do not care, and it is not sacrament, it is not liturgy. They were not really needed, only at mass. I can understand why, especially if they are coming to church thinking that they should be held up. I think they felt like some power was taken away from them. It was not just me. It was the way they treated volunteers; the way they talked to the parents. It became more and more negative.

It was personality, and my suspicion was that it had something to do with Amos and Albert both being from the Church of England. They had different ideas about how the Catholic Church should be and, in fact, they were shocked when they found that it is not that different. The only difference is that we do not have women as priests, but we do have lay women who are very involved with the church.

It was obvious that they had very low self-esteem. They were feeling very anxious about their role, and the way they would deal with it was to knock everyone else down, and especially me being there all the time. I was an easy target.

They would undermine everybody but especially Fr Clemens who could never challenge them. Amos and Albert would be actively against him. They would say the opposite of what Fr Clemens would say. It happened all the time and sometimes they would do it publicly. They would do it in homily, in the mass, the notices! They very much dominated; they wanted to be the dictators.

When he was at St Matthias, Fr Amos completely dismantled all the volunteers there. He knocked down every single group because he wanted to start again and the way he started it, he said to me, that he does not want any women or girls on the altar. He came to the Catholic Church because he did not like the fact that there are women in the Church of England. He had women helping him, but they would be in the office, taking his diary and making sure he is OK.

At the beginning it was OK, he tried to get people to help him with that, tried to enthuse people, and have a group of people. At first, people were very happy to help with the building because we wanted to have a good experience at mass, but that is all he did. He did not care about the rest of the stuff. People were saying: can we do any volunteering? He was just interested in the building, making the mass right for him. He would dress the statues and put the statue of Our Lady outside. Fr Amos was not happy about how people would receive the communion, so he would publicly refuse to give them communion unless they would do it his way.

Fr Albert was absolutely insistent that people should behave a certain way at mass. People should sing when he wants them to sing. He was very much directive of the congregation all the way through. I have been a few times to St Matthias when he was there, and you could see people physically crunching their jaws because they were not happy with what he was doing. Every single week, he was relentless, sing the same message

every single time. In terms of the congregation at St Matthias, he had a massive impact, and it would put people off. People would avoid him. There were quite a number of St Matthias' preachers who would come to mass here because they just could not take it anymore.

In terms of community, again Fr Albert, because as I said he knocked down all these volunteers, he would do things to the extreme, like take this post down. He was not interested in lay leaders at all. He did not want them in that position. As soon as somebody challenged something, he did not like it. I do not think Fr Albert saw them as anything more than just the congregation and he was the one in charge. I do not think he respected them at all. Things that people were working on, he would physically knock down to stop things from happening. I do not think he ever had a conversation. I know people have gone up to him and told him off and shouted at him in their frustration. Of course, he got angry. It was not a communication. It was not a two-way thing. The community was really hurt at St Matthias. They still need resolution; they need to be affirmed again. They need to be put back to their places in the community and in some ways, they kind of became more united because they would have secret meetings with staff to talk about Albert, but in general the community was shaken. The number of volunteers dropped dramatically at St Matthias because of him. People at St Matthias completely defied him. They are of a generation there, getting involved with the church, women being involved in the church. They were completely against his vision. They went to the Bishop and the same thing with Fr Amos. The whole generation of people has been lost now, that is what one of the people said to me. The parishioners need to have a lot of healing made.

I think the congregation should have a thick skin and not put all their hopes on the priest, to have solid faith in God and Jesus because, if you do not, you would be very easily knocked down. You have to develop confidence in your relationship with God. I think the one thing that they taught me is that I should not put my faith in human beings – even the priest. A lot of people I know in the church – their faith is the priest's faith. So, they hold their faith in the priest, and when the priest lets them down, they are completely shaken. I have learnt very early on not to do that. My faith is in God, so in a way it strengthened my faith and made me look at what really it is that I believe. I obviously respect their anointing and obviously they are anointed to the ministries, but my faith is not in that and it cannot be. I know that at the moment it is not Clemens, Amos or Albert, anyone. It is Jesus, it helps me, it strengthens my faith.

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