

## Trust as The Virtue for Ministry

Martin E. Marty

Trust me: when I changed the assigned “a” to the definite article “the” in the naming of this article, I had no monopolistic or (I hope) arrogant intent. The “We’re Number One” syndrome is no more in place when discussing “the virtues” than it is in the world of athletics, where claiming superiority is often an invitation to, or at least a precursor of, defeat or relegation to second or lower place. Background for the change: I trust the editors, who assigned “Trust as a Virtue for Ministry,” no doubt because they had been working through an index of “the virtues,” and “trust” comes along as one in the catalog of such. What I intend to provoke with the “The” language is the idea that readers do well to consider trust as being foundational. It is so basic that if it is broken, all the others tumble and creative, faithful ministry is fatally damaged. One could say the same of “love” and other virtues which we consider basic, but, for now, “trust” has its key place.

Note that in the previous sentence I spoke of “broken” trust. We don’t usually speak of “broken” sincerity or “broken” punctuality, however important those virtues are. They can be slighted, their absence provokes suspicion or irritation, but other aspects of ministry can cover for them until they be cultivated. Trust, however, presents itself as a golden chain around the other virtues, is integral to creative personhood, key to offices and rela-

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tions such as those implied in ministry. Why trust plays this foundational, basic, key role is a question which will be the focus of this essay: what to do about trust will suggest a practical side to this discourse.

I would not be fulfilling an aspect of trust relations expected of people in the academic world—my one home in the vocational duplex in which I've lived, alongside the ministerial world—if I did not invite readers to walk with me, prod me, teach me, as we probe these questions. The “I” and the “me” in that sentence is there to personalize the pursuit even though these are generic issues. Denizens of the academic world are trained and expected to take little for granted, to raise questions that should properly enter the reader's mind, and consider objections to whatever thesis gets raised. So we begin with objections and questions.

#### THE VALIDITY OF SPEAKING OF VIRTUES

First of all, we need to ask this question: are “virtues” proper ways to speak of dimensions connected with ministry? (I will speak mainly of Christian ministry, but assume that much of what is said here can easily be appropriated, by analogy, in other faith traditions.) In Christian ministry, be it Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, or “Free,” there are reasons to be a bit nervous about speaking casually about ministerial virtues. The Protestant Reformation, in whose heritage I find my ministerial abode, was emphatic: virtues, admirable though they be, are not at root human achievements, and they do not branch out into ego-centric claims on God. Instead, whatever significance we assign to the virtues has to be perceived and regarded first of all as gift, endowment, trust, for which the recipient becomes responsible. The purpose of a virtue is to develop and help make one be of service to others.

If trust is accepted as a gift and not as a mere and entirely human achievement, a second issue becomes pressing: *if* trust is a virtue—back up!—*is* trust a virtue? We translate the noun to an adjective to personalize it, noting that personalized trust is what concerns us here, having to do with a virtuous person, a virtuous minister. It is legitimate to speak of trust impersonally, of course. One “trusts” that an auto motor will start on a cold morning because we “trust” the record of the manufacturer or the guarantee. One “trusts” that an investment will pay off, connected as it is with a reliable “Bank and Trust” company. I threw that one in to remind readers that the story of broken trust can be an urgent and upsetting topic in daily life. Yet even in these impersonal illustrations, the human person is a vital connec-

tor in any trust transactions. The manufacturer, the car dealer, the warranty writers are humans who have to build and sustain trust. The banks, even those “too big to fail” merit trust or not, and if they fail the bankers will often walk away with bonuses, but they will have weakened or shattered trust in customers. Persons are prime. Trust is forever personal.

When we speak of trust as a virtue, then, in the world of ministers or other persons, we are really referring to “trustworthiness;” “worthy of confidence.” Whoever is thus worthy embodies and practices the virtue of trust. The dictionary definition is direct in *Merriam Webster*: trust is the “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something.” Throughout this article, then, when I refer to “trust” as a virtue, I am referring to—back to the dictionary—“trustworthiness,” relating to the adjective “trustworthy, worthy of confidence.”

#### ROOTS IN DIVINE TRUST IN THEISTIC TRADITIONS OF MINISTRY

The answer to the question of why trustworthiness is integral to effective ministry is apparent when one reflects on theology as affirmed in most forms of Christian service. While ministry is effectively practiced within non-theistic traditions in authentic ways, the overwhelming majority of Christian ministries begins with reference to, and finds grounding in, language of faith in God. In the Lutheran tradition of which I am a part, Luther’s interpretation of the First Commandment is that “we are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.” Fear meant and means that the human is to be in a relation of awe; love is the deepest response—affirmed in the words of Jesus in the New Testament (“God *is* love”) but then, relationally, to “trust God above all things” is the ordinance.

The minister who teaches, counsels, preaches, or administers on the basis of trust in God may use the language or follow the practices of ministry so regularly or unselfconsciously that he or she may have difficulty facing up to the radical concept of trusting God afresh. In a world where the empirical, the sphere accessible to sight, hearing, taste, and touch is ordinarily determinative—the world of trust beckons to the invisible. In that unseen world, trust is, or should be seen, as startlingly different. An emphasis on narrative or interpretation in ministry does not directly satisfy the empirical quest and risks breaking trust if the minister violates expectations of how God as “the Other” is perceived or spoken about. A popular evangelist some years ago was asked in a newspaper column if he could prove the existence of God,

blithely assured readers that he could. "I can prove that God exists. I talked to Him this very morning!" Logicians would call that a "category mistake" (*ignorantio elenchi*, a category worth filing mentally for the practice of ministry).

A category mistake deprives one of sense. A phrase like "Good morning, he explained" is a category mistake. A greeting is not an explanation. The minister who relies on such mistakes may charm for the moment until one thinks about it, but will in the end risk breaking trust. We may go further by protesting the notion that we must deal with the empirical, with the observable categories, when dealing with the invisible. Reliance on empirical categories can diminish experience of God. For the modern mind, there is often a thick curtain between the immanent and the transcendent that limits our imagination and responsiveness to what cannot be seen. If we require that a greeting like 'good morning' must be explained, how much more difficult will it be to speak of God as the 'Wholly Other' who comes into the world of the immanent in a variety of ways. This 'Other' is apprehended differently in different communions, through the Incarnation in Jesus, the hovering of the Holy Spirit, the sacraments and rites, the works of love. After all that has been said and done, the minister must rely on and build on trust in God. It is where we begin. All the rest in ministry follows from that trust.

*The Prototype Applied to Humans; to Ministers*

If trust in God is the prototype, the model, the inspirer, the enabler of ministry, this means that *somehow* something (or everything) in the act and expression of ministry has to derive from, be congruent with, and be measured by trust in God. And trust in ministry is even more complicated than trust in God. In the case of God, one expects reference to the limitless. In the case of ministry there should be some narrowing of the concept for focus. Yet it resists such narrowing. Unlike "plumbing" or "bar-tending" or "operating merry-go-rounds" or many other vocations or professions which conjure up and connote rather precise, if diverse, works and workings, "ministry" is protean. It takes on so many forms that definition is difficult.

Even in a journal such as this the protean character is evident. The accent in a register of forthcoming articles in this journal properly provides some focus on "pastoral care," "education," "storytelling," "clinical" work, "psychometrics," "counseling," "mentoring," and—then—"homiletics," to jar readers into remembrance that the preached word is part of ministry. Those references are only beginnings. The specialties of this journal are not seen by its editors, contributors, or readers as exclusive or exhausting all

that is meant in ministry. We should not complain: their abundance suggests the opportunities for serving or being helped in a world where service and help are elsewhere and otherwise often remote and vague. But the delicious variety of expressions and options makes it difficult to see what is meant, what is at stake, and what is demanded under the concept of ministry.

#### THE PROBLEM: WHO IS A MINISTER?

Within a believing community, who is a minister; who is to embody and express the virtue of trust, trustworthiness? Answering that question used to be easier when believers and the general public were or seemed to be content with a single horrible distinction between “clergy” and “laity.” That line may well be drawn by the Internal Revenue Service when it allows for tax exemption denied “lay people” and reserved for “ministers,” or the Selective Service officers who authorize “exemption” from military drafts for “ministers.” Most recently the United States Supreme Court made allowance for “ministerial exceptions” in the working of numerous privileges. It is hard to see in what ways such exemptions and exceptions serve the definition and practice of ministry. Are “ministers” to be trusted for their expertise, in such cases, in housing, fighting, and taxing, or trusted because they live with a different category?

Theologically, ecclesiastically, and practically, new problems have arisen as ministry is defined more broadly in many communions. Some shun the word “laity,” because it does not help define “ministry” in any appropriate way. Preferred in some communions, including my own, is the term and affirmation of “the ministry of the baptized.” All baptized persons are ministers, called to ministry. In Baptist and other churches which practice “believer’s baptism” there are corollary definitions and intentions. Then what happens in “ordination?” Is it necessary for building trust, or for authorizing special sorts of expression of the virtue of trust?

I ask the reader’s pardon if I dwell on this point a bit longer, since in my experience the development of the virtue of trust in ministry needs attention on this front. “What is ordination?” As a result of my experience as an ordained Lutheran pastor for a *very long time*, I am ready to challenge anyone to tell me exactly what ordination is.

Most testifiers to ordination are very interested in guarding their view of ordination—a perfectly legitimate interest. Testimony is often learned, sometimes vehement, presumably sincere, designed to build trust by ruling

out alternatives to the view of ordination being advocated. It has occurred to me that Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, my church body, is in full communion with other church groups whose polity about ordination and ministerial authorization were, in order: Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, Synodical, Connectional, Conferential, and—oops? What were we Lutherans called or labeled?

If I still don't know what ordination is precisely, I find reference to it valuable when discussing the virtue of trustworthiness in ministry. While two of the three faculties in which I taught at The University of Chicago were "secular," I was always happy when University biographies identified me as an "Ordained Lutheran Minister." The title was not cited to give me points or prestige; it counts for little at a secular university or in many secular institutions (Academy of This or That or even Hospital of This or That). If anything, being ordained is sometimes seen as slightly offensive. In polite company one does not always mention religious ties. But I found that reference to being ordained helped raise questions on campus, in the press, and in public life in general. It was a sign of commitment. When there were and are ministerial scandals—breakdowns of trust, let us remember—it meant that my kind had been troubled and I could not claim a "ministerial exemption," but had to suffer stigma or take responsibility. Investment bankers, politicians, and people in all professions "suffer" similarly. In their situation they have special burdens of and opportunities for reform, including of self.

If ordination was hard to define, an ancillary concept or designation has been helpful. Again, in my Lutheran tradition, we speak of being "ordained to the *office* of ministry." I like to think that some version of this applies to chaplains, counselors, teachers, administrators, researchers, camp counselors, professors, fund-raisers, and more. Many more, I would hope. What goes on when "office" is assumed? Often clergy/ordained ministers are called and appointed through agents of "the ministry of the baptized," or—excuse me for speaking habitually—some element of "the laity." In all cases they represent the whole body of believers or a specialized sub-section of them.

When they assume *an* or *any* office of ministry, they are called to specialized (not higher) standards for advancing trust. They may vow, pledge, affirm, or somehow or other, make public their commitment to fulfill that office. I am not in the business of advising on polity, but let me clear my throat a bit by saying that it might be good to make more of a point of ritual or other public responses to these public occasions of affirmation. So often joining a board, any board of a church body, local or global, or becoming part of a

hospital staff as an ordained minister is treated casually, even more haphazardly than becoming a leader in a service club. Destinies are at stake, hazards to faith, opportunities for service are all to be treated differently when one assumes a “fiduciary relationship” in any public expression of ministry. When such fiduciary trust is made public, the ministry of the whole baptized people of God [baptized or some also utterly serious involvement with God’s people] will prosper.

#### THE BREAKDOWN OF TRUST: SEX AND FINANCE

If there has been any sense of urgency projected as I have been writing about definitions, boundaries, and intentions, it has been prompted by the current crisis of confidence and the breakdown of trust in the offices of ministry. The most obvious instance is the “priestly sexual abuse scandal” in the Roman Catholic Church. Other faith traditions have their own scandals of trust—sexual or otherwise. While I write a weekly column and am often invited to comment on it, I have not done much on it and will not do so here. Reasons: 1) it receives major attention in the media, so “everyone knows about it;” 2) “everybody does it,” meaning Catholics wounded by the publicity and attention instantly and properly remind us that such abuse is common within many church bodies, and it is unfair to concentrate only on one; 3) many Catholics are engaged in self-examination and movement toward reform, and they will be more helpful than “outsiders;” 4) efforts to “do something” about it will demand experts in law, psychiatry, therapy, and bureaucracy, and they are busy and do not need the help of non-specialist non-Catholic Christians. Those four mentions are not to distract from attention to a scandalous breakdown of trust and trauma for the church (as) in America, but to permit us to move on to dealing with the trust issue generically.

In all cases where sexual transgression represents broken trust, certain features stand out. They are observed, reported on, and thus noticed and counted by non-members or “other-believers” as offenses which hurt all the non-offending members of a religious body. The abuse of children either as victims of adult (parental) sexual misadventures or by adultery on the part of those who hold offices of ministry inflicts damage on the church as well as children. For a variety of reasons profoundly locked into the human psyche, anything having to do with sexual themes draw attention more than other human misadventures. Many members of parishes or religious-related vol-

untary associations reassess their commitment to expressions of the church or the whole church when there is offense.

Take the instance when a minister of a parish gets involved sexually in a situation which leads, as it often does, to the break-up of two marriages and, often, two families. Congregational members who have related to the minister as a counselor, teacher, guide, perhaps ethical leader now find that their trust has been misplaced. So common are such situations that most churchly jurisdictions have had to work out policies and procedures for recovery of the wounded parties and restitution of the main offenders. Members of congregations become wary of placing any measure of trust in their successors in the office, are less enthusiastic about the work of the congregation, and less attentive to the teachings of the religious body. As I write this, it occurs to me to ask why am I giving attention to these topics within the limited space of an article, when many book length reports and studies are easily available and perhaps receive inordinate attention in publics which enjoy the lurid or relish *Schadenfreude*, rejoicing in the misfortunes of others. Answer: because the illustration evokes reinforcing and ever-expanding memories and observations that enable us to focus on the importance of trust in ministry.

Another illustration which sets up the issue comes not from the sexual but from the financial sphere. People who have known no reason to become aware of what is at stake in debates about Christology or Transubstantiation necessarily have an interest in the financial affairs of congregations, denominations, bureaus, task forces, religious schools, building ventures, and the many other agencies and directions which depend in no small measure on donated funds. The fund-raiser builds trust by invoking the "needs" of an invisible God who intervenes in human affairs or is gained access to by projects which involve funding. In recent years the fiscal life of all religious agencies has been thrown under a spotlight as they impinge more, depend more, or influence non-religious or other-religious agencies and projects. As fund-raising has become more complex, so there is more notoriety when there are aberrations demonstrating the need for clearer policies or greater oversight. In all cases, revelations of wrong-doing become seen as violations of sacred bonds more offensive than those in non-religious spheres. Again, since religious activity in the financial realm is dependent upon voluntary support as opposed to coerced (e.g., in taxation), the causes are injured because trust was broken.



## BREAKING CONFIDENCE IS BREAKING TRUST

A third realm which needs attention is the loss of the virtue of trust when a confidence is broken. Ministries of counseling, chaplaincy, parish life, and the like, depend upon confidence which comes close to having to depend on "absolute" trust. One need not often use the language of absolutes in religious life, but breaking trust in verbal transactions such as confession of sins or revelatory counseling make it appropriate. A sign of the regard that secular authorities give to this is the fact that government and policing agencies do all, or should do all, they can to hold in awe the "seal of the confessional." In the confession, be it regarded as part of sacramental life or just as regular pastoral and counseling ministry, if it is ministry, it is done under God and before God, where the confessor is invited and urged to lay bare her or his soul so that the depth of what is troubling and the height of resources for therapy and healing can be brought to the situation or crisis.

Of course, the counselor or evaluating agencies and committees may make mistakes at times. They may bring into relatively public life (which really and simply means, into public life) "secrets" of spiritual transaction because they were not aware of the boundaries in particular cases, but if they are secret-sharers, they will have lost the virtue of trust and will not be regarded as trustworthy a second time in the community once its members have become aware of transgressions. The community has depended upon keeping confidence and sustaining trust within a religious body of any sort, including as a congregation. Training counselors and, for that matter, committees where fiduciary relationships might depend upon secret-keeping can contribute to better circumstances. Such training, by the way, can include education in the ways of learning what is understood to be enhanced when measures of publicity are valuable. One notes "public meeting" laws and procedures.

Trust in practice is as elusive as it is essential. Richard Gula describes it as an 'expansive virtue' with these words: "Trustworthiness is an expansive virtue that entails the practice of many others. Among them are fidelity, honesty, fairness, truthfulness, loyalty, helpfulness, dependability, humility, and others...Ministers are to be exemplars of trustworthiness."<sup>1</sup> Because of its protean nature, trustworthiness is difficult to define and even more difficult to form. 'Basic trust,' Erik Erikson observed, is the need on which all other aspects of life are based. Trust is formed throughout life through trusting encounters with others. Finally, however, it is believing in God that creates communities in which we might grow in trust. Getting from childlike trust to end-of-life

commendation of one's self to God is a demanding pilgrimage. It needs constant attention. Each new occasion calls forth a new expression of trust, especially when there do not seem many reasons to be trusting.<sup>2</sup> Trust begets trust.

*Recovering Trust in Ministry, Beginning with the Self*

Any discussion about improvement in realizing the virtue of trust/trustworthiness in ministry begins with diagnoses and analyses, profitably shared in responsible communities such as parishes, campus ministries, staffs of healing agencies, hospitals, public relations, and all the rest. This means whenever there is risk, for all talk of trust will and must inevitably be engaged with risk. No risk? No need for trust. Trust? Risk is necessary. Mark Warren connects trust and risk in this way:

Trust involves a judgment, however implicitly, to accept vulnerability to the potential ill will of others by granting them discretionary power over some good. When one trusts, one accepts some amount of risk for potential harm in exchange for the benefits of cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

I like to think of dealing with the locales and situations of risk and thus evocations of trust and the employment of it as a virtue in a range of possible actions.

First, closest to home, is the development of the gift of trust within the self, which means beginning at home. Call that the "soul," however it is defined. Sooner or later, preferably sooner, effective philosophies, theologies, and therapies about trust ask the minister to begin with the need for self-examination and resolution. "To thine own self be true" can be reduced to a bromide or can be reappraised as the key to other spheres. That way of "knowing" is enriched by the look within, which is something in which faith traditions, texts, and communities claim to have and, let us be positive, often do have resources and techniques for improvement.

Beyond the self is the immediate Other who makes possible an opening to all humanity and the worlds they represent. While public and prophetic ministries have, or should have, global reach, pastoral ministries and their kin provide almost unequal opportunity for developing trust and the spiritual equipment for deepening it. Being at the bedside of the dying, teaching the young, acting in communities are places where ministers are observed. I once addressed a seminary commencement with a speech titled, "Welcome to the goldfish bowl!" having heard a spouse of a "commencing" graduate complain that she will be living in a goldfish bowl. While acknowledging and affirming the rights of privacy in ministerial life, I also remarked that when publics no longer observe people in ministries we are in real trouble. Paths of action are part of the witness, as they always have been.

Here the pressures of agenda, the prevalence of digital devices, and the habits of modernity distract from the development of community, which can do so much for developing the virtue of trust. “I am spiritual but not religious” is often the boast of the self-in-isolation that becomes a challenge to enhance communities of trust where trust is strengthened. Often ministers, being busy, do not put energies into profiting from and contributing to the life of colleagues, associates, professional peers. Not all of them trust these peers, out of fear of exposure to the souls of others, and therefore carry alone what is better given perspective in the lives of others, in this case, peers. “Going it alone,” in many of our cultures is hailed as a sign of strength and independence when it is often a shroud for weakness. Circles of friends, profound friends who go beyond tweeting and twittering, in the experience of the befriended, represent the world of those who seek and need and can enjoy trust relations.

It is clear in this reading that trust is intimately involved with community, which is a sphere in which the minister is to be at home. Robert Nisbet wrote of the values of “intermediation,” which refers to life in groups which stand between the individual and the larger society of media, politics, financial forces, and the like, where buffers and interpreting agencies are valued. These make possible connections to all kinds of association. ‘Association’ is less intimate than ‘community.’ Secrets are shared less there, relations can be ad hoc and pragmatic. Yet they are vital for life, as they are the main voluntary agencies where some levels of trust are integral. Ministers of all sorts practice interpretation, intermediation, and associational life in vivid ways—all of them depending upon the virtue of trust embodied in institutions.

Edmund Burke has spoken of these spheres and connections in language which makes them lustrous:

We begin our public affections in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen. We pass on to our neighborhoods, and our habitual provincial connections. These are inns and restive places. Such divisions of our country have been formed by habit, and not by a sudden jerk of authority, where so many little images of the great country in which the heart found something which it could fill. The love to the whole is not extinguished by this subordinate partiality.<sup>4</sup>

Pausing to reflect after each comma or period or phrase in Burke’s classic paragraph will provide an opportunity for readers to reappraise the theme of “trust as a/the virtue in ministry.” At book length I have spoken of how this can result in “cultures” or “sub-cultures” of trust. I argue there, or would here or anywhere, that trust as a virtue grows not by command or fiat or rhetoric

in isolation but incrementally and “intermediately” through expanding and overlapping subcultures, in this case cultures of virtue. Here ministries make their home and their mission. How shall we define ‘culture’? I depend upon one out of innumerable definitions available, in this case by Philip Bagby:

We have...defined culture as regularities in the behaviour, internal and external, of the members of a society, excluding those regularities which are clearly hereditary in origin...We might define a culture as a distinctive assemblage of culture-traits and complexes regularly found together...<sup>45</sup>

Just as there is a “motorcycle culture,” a “movie culture,” or a “political culture,” so there is a “ministerial” culture, parsed and subdivided in countless ways.

Ministers are defined by their focus in the God in whom they trust and their awareness of obligation and opportunity in the company of ministerial peers and the communities they serve. They are built up by practice, practice, and practice. By study, risk, trust itself, by story-telling and hearing, by resources in the sacred texts, and the most appropriate evidences of learning, and most of all by relation to the people of God who need them and feed them and test them, bidding for and often rewarding their trust, which is the highest kind of gift.

#### NOTES

1. Richard M. Gula, *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 47.
2. Martin E. Marty, *Speaking of Trust: Conversing with Luther about the Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 16–19.
3. Mark E. Warren, *Democracy and Trust* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
4. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 143–144.
5. Philip Bagby, *Culture and History; Prolegomena to the Comparative Study of Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1958), 93.

For further reading on trust and trustworthiness, see also:

Frank Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

Martin E. Martin, *Building Cultures of Trust* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

Jaroslav Pelikan, “Faith,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliadei, ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1987).