

Summary Dissertation

Rituelen in het individuele pastoraat Een praktisch theologisch onderzoek ¹

Rituals in individual pastoral care A practical-theological study

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One of the conspicuous phenomena of our time is an ongoing interest in rituals. Whereas churches are confronted by a decline of membership and fewer people go to church to have their rites of passages performed, elsewhere new forms of ritual are developed. It is an anthropological fact that human beings cannot live without rituals. If for any reason the traditional forms no longer satisfy, people start to look for new meaningful acts to ritualize their lives. These new rituals (and the interest in them) reveal a lot of what is going on in modern society. Nowadays in the Netherlands we live in a pluriform, multi-cultural and individualized society, which is strongly determined by the idea of the so-called free market. Increasingly people want to choose for themselves how to act and how to express themselves at specific times and occasions in their lives. This development has brought a great variety of rituals even onto 'the market of well-being', the world of psychotherapy and counselling. Several special practices for 'guidance of ritual' have opened their doors to individuals who seek help in order to create their own personal rituals.

This study concerns the use of rituals in pastoral care and counselling. Working with rituals is not unknown in pastoral care, it is in fact one of the oldest ways to offer people pastoral guidance and comfort. There are situations where our common language fails us. We then need another 'language' to share with each other our fears, hopes and faith. Sometimes this language can only be found in the symbolic acts of a (religious) ritual. Against the background described above it is for a Christian pastor (pastoral counsellor) a challenge as well as a necessity to reflect on the forms and meanings of the traditional rituals of the church and to develop contemporary rituals, especially in the practice of pastoral care and counselling. Rituals that do not fit with somebody's situation or experiences will neither be understood nor accepted. They cannot be of great help for a person in need. On the other hand, when these rituals contain nothing more than the expression of somebody's personal feelings and quest for meaning, we will have to ask what relationship there (still) is with the

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Christian faith. We are talking about *pastoral* care and counselling. How does the pastor handle this problem? What are the possibilities of the use of rituals in pastoral care and counselling nowadays, which boundaries have to be respected, what are the pitfalls? These questions made me set up a theoretical and empirical investigation in the field of practical theology. The central question to be answered became: *How and under which conditions can a pastor develop sound and effective ways of acting in and with rituals in the context of pastoral care and counselling?*

The research was executed in three phases. The first phase (see the chapters 2-4) was dedicated to the search for a theoretical framework that gives us the instruments for the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of rituals in the context of pastoral care and counselling. In the second phase (see the chapters 5-7) the contemporary pastoral practice of a group of Dutch pastors was studied by means of empirical research. In the third phase (see the chapters 8-9) the data obtained were analyzed and interpreted. Several recommendations, based on the research as a whole, could then be formulated. The main results will now be summarized per chapter:

Chapter 2: What is a ritual?

The broad area of disagreement among scholars about the definition of the term ritual is not easily reconciled. In order to find a suitable point of view in relation to the subject of this study three themes, which are immediately connected to the question how to define ritual, are explored. The themes are: 1) rituals and beliefs; 2) acting and thinking; 3) ritual, culture and identity. This exploration results in the following heuristic definition: *rituals are self-evident, unique or repeated, mostly symbolic actions, mostly accompanied by formulae and texts, in which human beings are physically and interactively involved in a reality that is presented in the ritual itself.*

Chapter 3: The function of ritual

Why do people perform rituals? On the basis of the study of anthropological, sociological and psychological literature I propose to visualise the interference of the several functions of ritual in the picture of a triangle. The main functions of ritual are of a psychohygienic (A), social (B) and noetical (C) type. In this so-called *function triangle* we find an useful instrument to make a functional analysis of rituals such as used in pastoral care and counselling. A description of these functions follows.

Chapter 4: Christian rituals and pastoral care and counselling

This chapters circles around the question how a pastor (whoever, wherever) can develop a theologically sound use of rituals in the context of pastoral care

and counselling. This question is connected with his identity as a pastor. Who is this pastor? Which are the leading concepts of his theology? Why is he or she acting as he or she does? When we locate pastoral rituals on the border of pastoral care and counselling and liturgy, pastoral rituals can be theologically verified when they interconnect in any way with the core rituals of the Christian tradition: baptism (a classical rite of passage) and eucharist (a classical rite of union). Therefore I use the picture of a series of concentric circles, the two core rituals in the heart of it. As long as a ritual in pastoral care can be located in one of these circles, nearer or farther away from the first circle, it can be identified as a true *pastoral* ritual. Knowledge of the structure of both core rituals of the Christian tradition can be very useful for a pastor who want to work with rituals.

Chapter 5: From theory to practice

After the more theoretical considerations this chapter functions as a bridge to the empirical part of the study. First of all we reflect on the usefulness of the theoretical framework developed until now. Can we trust the trail that we are following? A case originating from my own practice is described and analyzed by using the instruments we found for functional analysis and theological verification and identification.

Chapter 6: Contemporary pastoral practice

What use do Dutch pastors of the nineties make of rituals in their actual practice? A questionnaire was sent to all registered pastors of the Roman Catholic Church, the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland and the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk in the province of Utrecht to explore this field. There was a response of 74%, which is a very high percentage. There must be indeed a lively interest in the subject. Data analysis exists of a comparison of prosopography; of sort of pastoral work involved; of frequencies in conducting (several sorts of) liturgical services; of sort of problems these pastors come across; of role images of a pastor; and of the frequencies in the use of specific (named and unnamed) rituals. Factor analysis on the outcome of the last question makes clear that there are three groups of pastors who use a certain combination of specific (named) rituals: those who use quite often traditional 'catholic' rituals; those who use traditional 'protestant' rituals and a group that uses relatively often some new forms of ritual. A selection of respondents out of these three groups was taken for an in depth interview.

Chapter 7: Individual pastors and their counselees

This chapter contains the 16 'portraits' of pastors who were interviewed on their concepts of and experiences with rituals in their practice of pastoral care and counselling with individuals. They were also asked to describe a concrete case in which a ritual formed a central part of the proceeding. Six of the counselees involved in these cases were ready to be interviewed about their experiences. Reading these 22 stories, the variety of the rituals described is striking. All these rituals are very much embedded in the personal life-story of these people. The connection with liminal experiences like illness, death and mourning is also striking.

Chapter 8: Analysis of the interviews

First of all in the analysis of the interview material, the question is asked how these very different pastors, who are working in several fields (such as local church communities, general hospitals, a prison, etc.) ground their pastoral activities theologically. By comparing their statements about pastoral care and counselling, liturgy and ritual we can distinguish three types of pastors:

A. A pastor of type A chooses his starting point in the religious tradition that he represents in role and person. From there he tries to understand what is needed by his counsellee, and what he as a pastor has to offer to meet this need.

B. A pastor of type B chooses his starting point in the experiences of his counsellee. It is up to this person to determine in what direction the proceedings will be developed.

C. A pastor of type C chooses his starting point in the relationship between the experiences of the counsellee and the Christian faith. In the rituals that are actually performed quite often we find biblical stories and images.

The second part of this chapter contains three case-studies, one from each type. In the analysis both sides (pastor and counsellee) are looked at. There seems to be no ground to conclude that any of the types works more effectively with rituals in the context of pastoral care and counselling than any of the other(s). Authenticity seems to be a more important factor.

Chapter 9: 'Free to do and helpful': recommendations for pastoral practice

What are the outcomes of this study on the level of the pastoral practice itself? Summarizing we can say that a pastor can find good theological grounds on which to act with rituals in the context of pastoral care and counselling by connecting these rituals with the core rituals of the Christian faith: baptism and eucharist. There are four ways to do so. 1) The pastoral dimensions of baptism

and eucharist can themselves be purposeful used in the pastoral process. This is a possibility which is too often neglected. 2) The pastor can work with rituals that originate from, or are connected with, the liturgical complex of the 50 days around Easter. 3) New rituals with a structural analogy with baptism and/ or eucharist can be designed. 4) New rituals with an analogy of content with baptism and/or eucharist can be designed. The use of rituals in pastoral care and counselling will be effective a) when they fit closely with the situation and world (lifestory, language, actual experiences) of the counsellee; b) when the aims and functions of the chosen ritual agree with the aims and functions of the pastoral process as a whole; and c) when in the ritual itself the correct 'function line' (= the line that connects the two poles of the function triangle between which the main concern lies) is used.

Four short recommendations are formulated: 1) aim at art, not at tricks; 2) look for suitable counterparts in the world of the Christian tradition; 3) create (use) an enclosed area where the counsellee is free to move, do not occupy this area with your own personality; 4) find and maintain a connection to a living (formal or informal) community of faith.