

The ministry of administration: Finding grace in the mundane



Last Monday I attended a webinar (online seminar) with parish and school administrators from all over the country right here in the comfort of my office at John Carroll. Sponsored by Ave Maria Press, this professional development webinar was titled: “The Spirituality of Administration: Turning Mundane Tasks into Redeeming Work.”

The presenter was Ann Garrido, DMin, the Director of the MA program in Pastoral Studies at the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri. Her latest book “Redeeming Administration: 12 Spiritual Habits for Catholic Leaders in Parishes, Schools, Religious Communities, and Other Institutions” was published last month by Ave Maria Press. Therein Ann shares twelve spiritual habits for busy Catholic administrators, along with twelve saints whose lives illustrate each habit in practice.

Ann talks about how administration duties often take parish and school leaders away from why we got into ministry in the first place: regular encounters with the people we serve. Hence, there is a need for a spiritual focus to keep us grounded.

If we look closely at our role in administering our parish and school programs, we are invited to ask how the mundane “daily stuff” is part of how God transforms us into who He is calling us to be. In other words, we must be aware of all the potential grace involved as we sit at our desks answering emails, organizing events, listening to voicemails, and hearing the ping of yet another text message or reminder alert from our smart phones.



In the 60-minute webinar Ann was able to present with some depth three of

these spiritual habits:

1. Administration calls us to breadth of a vision:

- There is the 'gift-side' to knowing how all the pieces of our programs work together;
- We might be drawn to empathize with God's position in the universe, He who sees and loves the whole.
- Thus we might create an environment at our parish or school where life can flourish, where human creativity can blossom, and good work can happen naturally.

2. Administration calls us to trust:

- Most administrators have a love of order and want to see all their endeavors run smoothly as would happen if we ourselves were in control of all the details;
- Since we cannot micromanage everything, we are called to trust others to do their part in meeting our goals;
- Ann made some good points about how God has graciously distributed His gifts. Our colleagues cannot get more experience if we do not allow them to collaborate with us: We might need to turn over aspects of our programs that we enjoy the most or feel most competent and trust that things will run smoothly.

One of the most important parts of my personal reflection came from Ann's general musing "Does anything I do make a difference?" She brings up the 'poverty' in the ministry of administration: a poverty (or lack) of measurable outcomes and visible results since so much of what we do does not give us immediate feedback. Hence, administration teaches that we must trust in God: He who takes care of things that we don't always see, including the basic goodness in the world which makes our ministry possible.

3. Administration calls us to humility:

- To be aware of our own shortcomings and limitations is always a humbling experience, especially for those administrators who are in supervision and called to do performance evaluations on their staff:

As Ann mused, “Hello, splinter. This is plank speaking.”

- We all want to be good and competent and lovable, but we are not always successful there. Ann shared about a Lutheran pastor who speaks of a certain ‘shame’ in administration: including guilt over actions done and actions not done, and of not doing enough or being enough. This feeling of shame can paralyze good administrators and cause them to be less effective.

- Since administration offers endless opportunities to get a more accurate picture of ourselves, we are able to recognize sides that we wish were not there. Ann contends that the gift is to be comfortable with this ‘other sense’ of self: we are not perfect. We come to know and recognize our gifts, talents, and successes, as well as our challenges and where we need to learn more. The Christian tradition of humility allows us to admit that I am “still growing in my job.”

Looking forward:

As you can probably see, there was so much to reflect on and consider as Ann detailed stories on these three spiritual habits. Her book contains nine others, as well as twelve habit-modeling saints from whom we can draw inspiration and wisdom. Included in her book are prayers and reflections for each chapter. Ave Maria Press offers accompanying free downloads, include a small-group guide and prayer resources.

Those of us who serve our parishes and schools, religious communities and dioceses in administration often speak about being called to this work as our vocation. “Vocation is where your deepest joy meets the world’s deepest need,” according to Ann Garrido. Thus we who serve in administration encounter frustrations because we have so much passion and desire to do much good.

Through Ann’s reflections in her new book we are called to make the sometimes-dull

administrative tasks into opportunities of grace, making us holier and happier people in the long run.

Special Note:

My favorite part of the webinar was the quote from one of Ann Garrido's friends: "The ministry of administration is in the interruption." I will share about grace-filled moments in the interruptions in my Campus Ministry Office soon.

Watch the full webinar (63 minutes) with Ann Garrido, DMin here: