



LUKENOTES

SAINT LUKE INSTITUTE INC. • 8901 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE • SILVER SPRING MD 20903

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CASE STUDY

"Father Pete" • Trauma and Spirituality

William Moorman, O.S.S.T., Ph.D., is Director of Spiritual Formation at SLI.

Father Pete, a 62 year-old religious order priest, was admitted to SLI due to a lack of sexual integration and some exploitive actions with adult women; namely, he had inappropriately touched and sought affection from women. During his assessment, it was documented that Fr. Pete had a history of diabetes dating from childhood. Fr. Pete described his early life as difficult because he was often ridiculed and shamed by his father who viewed his diabetes as a character flaw and a source of shame for the family.

In addition to struggling with this medical condition, Fr. Pete also felt unaccepted by his father because he was not interested in what his father termed "manly things." Fr. Pete was a sensitive, quiet child, who was interested in music and reading. In addition, he was quite an accomplished artist. Instead of participating in sports, Fr. Pete found himself often working with the girls in his class, helping with class projects where he was able to utilize his artistic skills. Rather than appreciating Fr. Pete's skills and his successes, his father chose to tease him about "being a real man" and about sexual matters, often embarrassing him in front of relatives and friends. This continued even into adolescence even though he was elected as a class officer in high school and was friends with both girls and boys. When Fr. Pete shared with his family that he wanted to be a priest, his father was barely supportive, suggesting that given his interests, choosing to be a priest was probably a good way for him to make it in the real world.

These traumatic, shaming and unsupportive incidences, in conjunction with his poor understanding of sexuality, are pivotal factors in understanding Fr. Pete's exploitive behaviors and his particular challenges with regard to spirituality and his God relationship.

Trauma and Spirituality

In addition to the various therapies offered to Fr. Pete to address his difficulties, he also engaged in ongoing spiritual direction while in treatment. In exploring his image of God, Fr. Pete found it difficult to conceptualize a loving "male" God as Father. To assist him to explore images of God, Fr. Pete was asked to remember some of the most loving and secure memories he could recall. He remembers being held by his mother and laying his head in his mother's lap when he was struggling with his diabetes. He remembered with fondness how she would sing to him while running her hand through his hair and how comforted he felt with her. In addition he remembers an incident in seventh grade when he had a diabetic attack and collapsed in the classroom and many of the children were laughing. At this time, his best friend and classmate, Patricia, stayed with him and began hugging and assuring him while they awaited medical

assistance. Fr. Pete and Patricia maintained their friendship throughout their childhood and adolescence and she still remains a loyal and caring friend to this day. Over the years, Fr. Pete has been able to share with Patricia on an emotional level and she has welcomed him into her home and family.

Recalling these memories of unconditional love and care formed the new foundation for Fr. Pete's emerging images of God. Through ongoing therapy and spiritual direction, his image of God became less an amorphous concept in Fr. Pete's head, and more a concrete conviction in his heart. As he came to understand that women were powerful symbols of warmth, nurturance and security, he began to consider feminine images of God. Fr. Pete's clearest image of God, however, emerged while doing some inner child work with his spiritual director. When he began to relate to God as his friend, Fr. Pete realized that this image mirrored his life-long friendship with Patricia. This relationship with Patricia had always been special, and the unconditional love and support of his friend served as a model of how God loves him and others.

With an evolving God image, Fr. Pete's emotional relationship with God began to develop as well. He discovered a God with whom he could genuinely relate on an emotional level. In prayer, Fr. Pete began to share his feelings with God for the first time. He expressed his anger at God for certain events in his life and was surprised to view his anger as prayer. He also discovered a God with whom he could laugh, an experience which convinced Fr. Pete that he would finally have a partner in ministry. Most important for Fr. Pete was the experience of being desired by God, which confirmed for him the genuineness of the relationship he now shared with God.

Shortly before his discharge, Fr. Pete stated that in addition to the benefits of psychotherapy at St. Luke's, he was also able, through spiritual direction, to embrace the Paschal Mystery. In his personal dying and rising, Fr. Pete discovered that he had come home to himself. The life-long shame he felt for his body and person, and the disdain he held toward his sexuality as a celibate male, were replaced by a new sense of appreciation for himself, his gifts, his body and his sexual feelings.

By addressing the pain of his past, Fr. Pete achieved a new understanding of himself in the present. This new understanding allowed him to establish the appropriate boundaries he will need to continue in ministry. Fr. Pete's relationship with God continues to grow and mature as he attends to all the sacred relationships in his life. Fr. Pete has found the peace that had always eluded him.

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