

Speaking of God

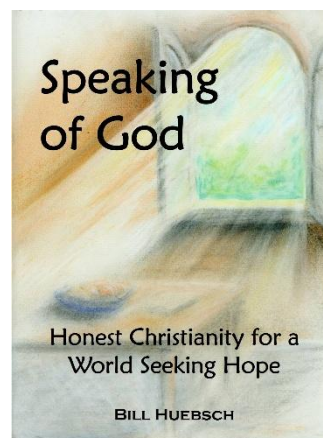
Honest Christianity for a World Seeking Hope

How the new Vocabulary Plays Out in Ministries of Pastoral Care

What New Vocabulary?

Bill's new book, *Speaking of God: Honest Christianity for a World Seeking Hope* presents a new vocabulary for prayer and belief that invites us to speak of God in words that reflect love rather than fear and inclusion rather than exclusion. It moves beyond images of a distant or punitive male deity toward the living presence of Holy Mystery who dwells within and among us.

This renewed language helps us pray honestly, live compassionately, and see faith not as rigid doctrine but as a relationship grounded in grace. In finding new words for prayer—new ways to address God—we rediscover the ancient truth: God is love and love still speaks.



Pastoral Care

Bringing this new vocabulary for prayer and faith into the **pastoral care ministries** of a parish really reshapes how the church ministers to people in all stages and situations of life. Here's how it might play out:

Ministry to the Sick and Homebound

This refreshed vocabulary brings with it a shift in tone. As we saw above in chapter 11 on Christian Prayer, prayer, even when we're sick or elderly, always calls us to action. It calls us to love. Therefore, rather than presenting God as a distant judge who rewards or punishes by sending illness to test us or punish us—a message too often suggested in the past—pastoral ministers embody the *Indwelling God* who is already present with the sick person.

So the visit to the sick, homebound, or even the dying, becomes an opportunity to gently help them see to what or whom God may be calling them through this situation.

Focus your visit on God's *tender companionship*, assuring the person that even in weakness they are not abandoned. The Holy One remains with us at all times, through pastoral ministers and their presence, through the Word broken open and shared, and simply

in the depths of our hearts where we sense the Presence of God.

Eucharist then, is a gift and we offer it, not as a duty, but as God's *Incarnate Love* drawing near in bread and wine. It is presented to the ill or homebound as an extension of the Sunday Liturgy, a sharing in the community. It is Christ's gift of himself, presented through the love of the pastoral care minister.

Even though only priests can celebrate the Sacrament of Healing, lay and deacon care ministers can pray with the person and their family or friends who may be present. Gather folks around the bed or sitting area of the person you are visiting, join hands if appropriate, and lead the group in prayer. Emphasize *peace, healing, and presence* in the prayer, rather than fear or bargaining with God.

Sample Prayer for the Sick or Homebound

Greeting

Minister: Peace be with you. We have come together to remember that God is here with us—Holy Mystery, in Love, Incarnate, and Indwelling. Holy Mystery remains with us always.

Opening Prayer

Jesus, Loving God, Teacher, Healer, and Friend,
you are never far away, but always near
—in our breath, our hearts, and our gathering.
We entrust [N.] into your tender care today.
Fill this home with your peace,
and let your Spirit bring comfort and strength.
In the name of the Holy One walking with us. Amen.
(*Invite others to offer a prayer.*)

Scripture:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (*Matthew 11:28*)

Reflection (brief, from minister):

(A few words may be shared but keep it brief.) The Presence of the Holy One is near to us here in this place. Even in times of illness or weakness, God's Presence is not distant but indwelling, offering strength, peace, and love. Jesus himself drew close to the sick, touching, healing, and bringing hope. Today, in this prayer, we share that same closeness and mercy.

Prayer as Jesus Taught in this revised version

or the traditional form of the Our Father

O *Holy Mystery*, Source of all Love,
 you bring together heaven and earth
 and your very name is Holy!
May your reign be established among us
 as we follow your way of life.
May we see that you give us enough bread
 to sustain ourselves
 and feed the world.
May we know forgiveness and grace
 as we pardon those who offend us.
May we not fail when facing temptation
 and be safe when facing evil.
For the kingdom of love,
 the power of healing,
 and the glory of mercy
 begin and end with you!
 Amen.

Blessing

Minister: May Christ the Servant walk beside you,
may the Spirit dwell within you,
and may God's peace rest upon you now and always. Amen.

Grief and Bereavement Ministry

Comfort for those who have suffered through the death of a loved one comes not from imagining a far-off heaven alone, but from trusting the *Mystery of Love* who holds life and death in compassion.

In fact, the love in the heart of the deceased remains with us. It is eternal and held kindly by the Holy One. Their love for us doesn't end but becomes a beacon in the night for us, a reminder that God's love is always near.

Speak of the deceased as already embraced in God's *Indwelling Life*. Offer prayers that emphasize God's nearness to the grieving family, walking with them in their sorrow. Help mourners discover hope in the *Paschal Mystery*—that death and loss are taken up into God's eternal love.

Here's a sample of the sort of prayer in the new vocabulary that will help heal hearts and bring the love of the parish to this family through the pastoral care minister. Or adapt the prayer service above for this purpose.

Prayer After Someone Has Died

Loving God,
you are near to us in our sorrow.
You hold our loved one in your gentle embrace,
and you hold us, too, as we experience sadness and loss.

When tears come, let them mingle with your mercy.
When silence falls, let it rest in your peace.
When memories rise, let them shine with your love.

You know about death, O Jesus,
for you had to face it and pass through it yourself.
Now stand beside us and assure us
that you remain near us in love.

Stay close to this family, O God.
Walk with them in the nights ahead.
Let hope return with the dawn,
and may your Presence be their comfort,
now and always. Amen.

Ministry to the Poor, Vulnerable, and Marginalized

Serving the poor and abandoned, the vulnerable and those living on the margins of society must flow not from obligation or guilt on the part of the pastoral care minister, but from recognizing Christ *Incarnate* and *Indwelling* in the poor and suffering.

Parish ministries of food, shelter, and outreach should be framed as encounters with the face of God. This isn't to suggest that God somehow magically appears on the faces of the

poor, but that the Holy One has called us to be God's face to them.

When we teach about this in the parish, or when we recruit new volunteers to work in this ministry, we should highlight that the poor are not mere objects of charity, seeking help from others who need no help themselves. Rather, we all need each other's support, and the poor will offer you as a minister a great gift because they are the bearers of God's Presence to you.

This ministry in the parish flows from the “community table,” where Eucharist flows into shared meals and hospitality. To receive the Body of Christ at communion is to receive all those whom Christ loves.

Prayer Before Ministry

Holy Mystery of Love,
you dwell in every heart,
and you meet me now in those
who are hungry, lonely, or cast aside.

Give me eyes to see your face,
ears to hear their story,
hands to serve with gentleness,
and a heart that does not judge
but pours out mercy.

Empty me of pride and fear;
fill me instead with your Spirit,
so that in every encounter today,
it is your love that is given,
your peace that is shared,
and your Presence that is known. Amen.

Marriage and Family Pastoral Care

Ever since Vatican II, we have taught that marriage is a covenant, not mainly a legal contract. It is a sacrament of *self-giving love*—God’s own self shared between spouses. This language emphasizes mutual self-giving and the couple’s participation in God’s own faithful covenant with humanity.

Rather than being bound only by law, husband and wife are united in a partnership of the whole of life (*communio personarum*, in Latin), ordered toward both the good of the

Here’s a prayer that you as a pastoral care minister might pray before you encounter those in need:

spouses and the procreation and education of children.

Couples are encouraged to see their relationship as a mirror of the *Incarnate God’s* tenderness.

Parenting is framed as cooperating with God’s *Indwelling Presence* in children, guiding them toward holiness in ordinary life. Thus, family life becomes a training ground for mercy, forgiveness, and peace.

Ministry of Family Life

A parish that takes seriously the covenantal vision of marriage and family life must begin with accompaniment and welcome. Just as God's covenant is marked by faithfulness and compassion, so the parish is called to walk with families in all their diversity—married couples, the divorced and remarried, cohabiting couples, single-parent households, and same-sex couples.

Instead of leading with judgment or exclusion, ministry begins with hospitality, meeting people where they are, and affirming that God's love is already present and active in their lives. This spirit of accompaniment reflects the pastoral heart of Jesus, who drew near to people in their everyday struggles and joys.

Parish ministry must also offer formation in covenant and communion. Families and households need guidance and encouragement in living covenantal love—a love marked by mutual self-giving, fidelity, forgiveness, and

growth. Formation programs for children, youth, couples, and adults should highlight that every household is a “domestic church,” a sacred place where God's Indwelling Presence is revealed in the ordinary rhythms of life: meals, reconciliation, celebrations, and even conflict. At the same time, formation reminds families that they are part of a larger covenant — the parish community — where all are bound together in Christ and called to live in communion.

The parish does not only minister to families but empowers families to be ministers themselves: to serve the poor, to model reconciliation, to advocate for justice, and to bring Christ's love into workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods. In this way, the parish becomes a living covenant community, supporting families in their needs and sending them forth as witnesses of God's covenantal love.

Divorced and Remarried

Instead of seeing divorce and remarriage only through the lens of rules and failures, the church can emphasize God's *abiding Presence* in people's real, complicated lives. Ministers approach these couples as beloved children of God in whom the Spirit still dwells.

Emphasis is placed on God's *mercy and healing*, helping individuals find reconciliation with themselves, with others, and with the community. Accompaniment is offered so they experience the parish as a place of welcome, not judgment.

Cohabiting Couples

Rather than beginning with critique, ministry can recognize God's *Incarnate Presence* in the love, longing, and commitment that already exists between the couple. Ministers help couples see their relationship as a journey toward holiness and self-giving love, inviting them deeper into God's life.

Pastoral care affirms what is good in their relationship while gently calling them to reflect on next steps in light of faith. Prayer, conversation, and community life become entry points for grace, instead of barriers.

Gay Couples

God is not absent from the lives of gay couples but is *Indwelling* in their love, their struggles, and their desire for fidelity and community. The parish affirms their dignity as beloved of God, offering space for prayer, dialogue, and support. Ministers can highlight how *Holy Mystery* is present in their commitment, compassion, and acts of service.

Rather than exclusion, accompaniment emphasizes belonging, healing, and trust in God's nearness.

In summary:

Using the new vocabulary of Holy Mystery, in Love, Incarnate, Indwelling can deeply shape how a parish accompanies groups like the divorced and remarried, cohabitating couples, and gay couples. It allows ministry to move away from exclusion and judgment, and toward presence, accompaniment, and transformation in love.

For these couples, the pastoral implication of this new vocabulary is that ministry becomes a ministry of presence, mercy, and accompaniment. It affirms that God is already dwelling in their lives and invites them into deeper love, trust, and community, rather than beginning with exclusion or rejection.

Pastoral Care Implications Across All Groups

Mercy and Tenderness: Every ministry begins with the conviction that God's love is lavish and unconditional.

Inclusion over Exclusion: These groups should experience the parish as a home where *Holy Mystery* welcomes, heals, and calls them forward.

Formation through Relationship: Instead of only rules, catechesis uses the language of *Love, Incarnate, Indwelling* to help people see how God is already at work in their lives, and to invite them to deepen their discipleship.

Witness to the Wider Church: Parishes that embody this vocabulary model a way of being church that reflects Jesus' own pastoral style — dining with outcasts, befriending the marginalized, offering healing and reconciliation before judgment.

Pastoral care ministries become less about explaining doctrines or enforcing duties, and more about **revealing God's nearness:**

- The **sick** experience God's healing Presence.
- The **grieving** discover God's compassion in sorrow.
- The **poor** reveal God's incarnate face.
- **Families** learn that their love reflects God's self-giving love.
- The **whole parish** grows into a community of listening, accompaniment, and mercy.

The Litany of Welcome

Many parishes already use this “Litany of Welcome” to both get the word out to those who don’t know we love them, and also at the same time to catechize the rest of the parish about that. For many people, they never “hear their name” mentioned at Mass because they’re on the lists of “outsiders.” You can change that by offering an explicit welcome. Ask a parish leader to read this, or a variation of it, before Mass once a month or so.

The Litany of Welcome

Who are you? Are you divorced? Are you married with kids, worrying for them and committed to their welfare? Are you married for the second or even the third time? Are you a single parent struggling to make ends meet? Are you gay or lesbian? Well, if you are, then you belong to us because you belong to Christ. Christ is the host here today. Christ sets this table. And Christ welcomes all.

Are you lonely? Are you a widow? Are you a single man or woman who would prefer to have a spouse? Are you sorting out gender questions? Are you disabled or disfigured? Have you run out of luck? Are you living with shame? Have you been a prisoner? Well, if you are, then you belong to us because you belong to Christ. Christ is the host here today. Christ sets this table. And Christ welcomes all.

Are you a newcomer in this parish? An immigrant maybe? Are you from another Christian tradition? Are you full of doubt today? Has it been a while since you darkened the doorway of this church? Or are you a regular here, full of faith and enthusiasm for the parish? Well, if you are, then you belong to us because you belong to Christ. Christ is the host here today. Christ sets this table. And Christ welcomes all.

All people of goodwill are welcome here: that's the really good news! If you've been away, you can come back. If you've been living in darkness, you can come to the light. If you haven't been able to believe without seeing him, look around you, the Body of Christ has come to Mass today. Sinners are welcome. Saints, too. All are welcome.