

Wisdom on self-care from Gregory the Great

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Gregory the Great, pope from 590-604 AD, wrote the [Pastoral Rule](#) to strengthen the office of the episcopacy following the fall of Rome. Widely read throughout Europe by bishops and laypeople, this treatise describes how bishops should lead, teach, live their lives, and govern others.

The *Pastoral Rule* was intended to reshape and empower bishops following the spiritual, cultural, and economic deterioration of the Roman Empire. Gregory [emphasizes](#) the need for bishops to repair the church by providing skillful leadership and spiritual guidance in their ministries:

No one presumes to teach an art till he has first, with intent meditation, learned it. What rashness is it, then, for the unskillful to assume pastoral authority, since the government of souls is the art of arts! For who can be ignorant that the sores of the thoughts of men are more occult than the sores of the bowels? And yet how often do men who have no knowledge whatever of spiritual precepts fearlessly profess themselves physicians of the heart.

We might rethink our understanding of ministry today through the precepts of the *Pastoral Rule*, beginning with Gregory's understanding of ministry.

For Gregory, the minister is the curate of souls and ministry is *cura animarum*, the cure of souls. While the context may vary, the focus of ministry has always been the *anima*, the soul. But caring for the soul means also paying attention to the needs of the body. Following the fall of Rome, poverty and hunger were rampant. Gregory understood that ministry required healing both soul and body. Good ministry provides care for those in need and challenges the wealthy to see and understand how their wealth contributes to the impoverishment of others. In this sense, Gregory had a keen sense of how our lives are interconnected, and he articulates well our responsibility to and for one another.

Almost 1,500 years later, the *Pastoral Rule* still offers important lessons for effective ministry, especially in times of crisis and need. As the religious landscape rapidly changes, it's a priority in many religious traditions to rethink leadership so ministers might respond with skill. This points back to Gregory's first concern: how should ministers lead, teach, live, and govern?

Religious leaders' voices are critical in shaping our vision of the world and our commitment to justice. Today's religious leader is concerned with healing both mind and body, an advocate for the poor, the sick, and the suffering with compassion for the diversity of humankind. Such daunting challenges often lead to illness and burnout, so self-care is important: the vessel must be replenished if it is to continue to pour. This reality has not changed since the time of Pope Gregory, and although the *Pastoral Rule* was aimed at bishops his counsel is useful to all of us in our various callings.

Self-care is a continual process of renewal. This process entails not just discrete activities in which we might engage—such as attending a retreat, journal writing, meditation, or meeting with friends—but an ongoing and prominent practice of mindful awareness and the cultivation of self-compassion. When we practice self-care from a place of mindful awareness, we learn to make friends with ourselves and embrace our deepest goodness, even in the midst of adversity.

A strong spiritual practice is also critical to healthy relational ministry. Gregory [articulates well](#) what is at stake when self-care falters:

There are some also who investigate spiritual precepts with cunning care, but what they penetrate with their understanding they trample on in their lives: all at once they teach the things which not by practice but by study they have learned; and what in words they preach by their manners they impugn.

Religious leaders who maintain an ongoing practice of self-care diminish stress and burnout, have more compassion and patience for counseling the troubled, and are more prudent in their leadership decisions. These attributes of leadership are timeless.

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