

Ministering to Individual Youth

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“Coming close to God as one spirit in repentance is better in God's sight than all sacrifices, for there is nothing in the world that God prefers than the human soul, for everything in the world passes away except the soul which does not.” Thus said one of the saints.

The Lord showed us clearly on many occasions how important He thought ministering to individuals was. We see Him, for instance, insisting on going through Samaria in order to meet after a six-hour walk with the Samaritan woman and to save her from her sin. Or He sits in the quiet of the night with Nicodemus to explain the second birth to him. He treats his disciples differently depending on the personality and ability of each; He is tender with John allowing him to lean against his breast because He knows that this heart will grow in love. He warns Judas several times, concealing his wrongdoings and being careful not to hurt his feelings, leaving the purse with him although He knew he was a thief in order to give him a chance to repent.

Ministering to individuals is absolutely necessary for the salvation of souls. This is what caused the apostle to instruct his disciples in the letter to the Ephesians saying, “*for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears*” (Acts 20: 31). He says to the Colossians, “*warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus*” (Col. 1: 28). Because the apostle personally experienced the Lord’s feelings for him as a lost sheep, he followed the same method in his ministry. “*Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?*” (2 Cor. 11: 29)

First: The Importance of Ministering to Individuals:

Each human being has a soul that is different from others because of inherited forces as well as his environment and the experiences he has had. The Lord uses approaches and methods that are as numerous and varied as the number of human beings themselves

There are different kinds of youth, each with their own needs and appropriate ways of ministering to them:

Reckless youth who are far from God's house and need the living word to counter their heedlessness. "*Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep*" (Lk. 6: 25). But forcing the issue can lead to a negative reaction, driving the young people to more recklessness and strong aversion.

There are youth that submits to sin in discouragement and humiliation, despairing of repentance and cleansing. These need to hear the glad news of saving grace to all and to be encouraged in their struggle. They need to fix their sights on Christ, the end and means of our struggle, so that they can break out of their egotism and self-reliance and turn their hearts to Christ in love and trust. He is their real objective and living in His presence is an enduring goal. They become preoccupied with Christ and are no longer focused on self or on their sins. However, a wrong approach or a message that is not anointed by the Holy Spirit could lead the young person to greater confusion and to surrender to sin, despairing of salvation.

3. *There is the young person who is regular in church attendance* and in spiritual exercises without experiencing Christianity in depth and without an inner surrender to Christ. This young person needs the seed of life to be implanted in his heart and to have his dangerous complacency disturbed. He needs to be led to a sincere repentance, inner depth, and a real change. Approaching this individual as one giving advice or issuing warnings, or in the proud spirit of one who has had better experiences, could confirm this person in his routine so that he remains unconvinced of his need for change.

4. *There is the young person who is walking along the Lord's way with a sincere heart.* He needs a small push and some direction. However, if the minister storms this lovely soul as a guide and leader using his own emotional techniques without heavenly guidance, or without being entrusted by the Lord with this task, this could stunt the growth of the young person and cause him to leave Christ's realm. This could also make of this young person "a proud saint" who will easily fall prey to attacks from the right (that is, of pride and self-righteousness).

5. *There is the doubting young individual* who asks a lot of questions and who relies on his efforts and exercises which he carries out with morbid punctiliousness. He is constantly making specific inquiries about correct behavior, speech, and relations. He needs a living message that will make him stop thinking that he can make it on his own and will stop him making of self an idol he worships. He needs to accept the fact that he can make mistakes and learn from

them, and that he can be misunderstood and slighted. He needs to know that his weakness can destroy his false respectability. As a result, he will be able to travel along Christ's way in absolute fidelity to His person and in obedience to His commandments without doubts, fears, or anxieties, but rather in the security, confidence, and joy whose source is Christ's light inside him, the Holy Spirit's clear guiding voice, and the providence of his spiritual father. He will have a whole heart that focuses on Christ and asks nothing for itself. However, a wrong approach to this soul could increase its confusion, making him misinterpret our talk about the freedom of the children of God as an opportunity for negligence and an occasion for the sins of the flesh.

Therefore, although ministering to individuals is vitally important, it is a two-edged sword. It can become a harmful weapon in our hands. That is why the servant needs special grace to minister to individuals and to direct souls wisely. "*He who wins souls is wise.*" (Pr. 11: 30).

Second, The Limitations of Individual Ministry:

There are limitations to ministering to individuals that constrain the minister and which he should be aware of:

The extent of his responsibility for a soul:

The servant sometimes assumes that he is responsible for the salvation of sinners and for bringing them to repentance through his blessed ministry. The truth is that the salvation of man is more difficult than the creation of heaven and earth, or Christ would not have been entrusted with His incarnation or crucifixion. God's intervention is clearly necessary for the salvation of souls.

The Holy Spirit alone can rebuke and without His loving and wise rebuke, man's condemnation of a sinner can turn into an abhorrent poison. He is the guide who leads people to the heart of Christ and the blood of the cross, helping them to have faith and to trust in Him. He persuades them of the possibility of salvation through the person of Christ. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the instructions of the servant are burdensome to the young person and as boring as a monotonous record whose tunes send him to sleep.

The Holy Spirit is the real minister and man (whether priest or servant) is merely a tool in the hands of the Spirit to use or not as He sees fit, to win this particular soul and not another at that particular time and not another. That is why the servant must set aside all his personal weapons and the feeling that he is able to bring people to repentance. He must discard all fleshly zeal, surrendering himself in utter weakness to the Holy Spirit to use him as He wishes, only telling Him about the souls and asking Him to intervene and do the work.

The extent of his fruitfulness:

God may use us in bringing about the repentance of an individual, so we imagine that we are the cause although “*others have labored and you have entered into their labors.*” (Jn. 4: 38).

It is therefore not appropriate for a servant (priest or deacon) to count the souls who have repented through his ministry or through that of others. Repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit and it is not for man to attribute to himself the ability to save others. The servant’s responsibility to be fruitful resides in the extent to which he offers himself as a living sacrifice to Christ and His word, and when Christ is lifted up, He draws all to Himself.

The extent to which he guides souls:

When a young person asks us about the spiritual path, we sometimes imagine that we are responsible for making him “a disciple”. How dangerous this word has become nowadays! No apostle or teacher in the early church considered his children to be his personal disciples. He and his children were Christ’s disciples. The role of the minister as defined by St. Paul is: “*My little children for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you.*” (Gal. 4: 19). That is, his role is to pray earnestly for them, and to guide them gently and from a distance, pointing out the signposts along the way. He has to remind them always of the necessity to throw oneself onto Christ’s breast and to train oneself to hear the Lord’s loving voice, receiving His faithful guidance in living daily fellowship with Him.

Oftentimes the idea of discipleship in church is perverted into a self-deception that justifies its crafty aims of forming disciples and followers who adopt the ways, mannerisms, ideas, and tendencies of their teacher without a living experience of the freedom of interacting with God and becoming attached to Christ. This method creates flawed copies that do not reflect the image of Christ, and not even the image of the “teacher”.

A young person might assume the personality of his teacher, especially in adolescence. But it is up to the servant to attract him to Christ, and to drive him away from himself towards the Savior by distancing himself and treating the young person in a matter of fact fashion. He should not focus on him, but pray sincerely for him and lead him to others. Discipleship means that minister and ministered unto should all become disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. The young people perceive that the image of Christ is reflected in their minister. They see that he has grown more and is further along the way than they are and so use him as a guide to direct and motivate them to follow the Lord. They absorb the correct

way and life from him.

4. The extent to which he storms the spirit:

Often, souls are stormed and invaded so that their secrets are revealed (even by father confessors) as though we had all the solutions to all their problems or as though we had the right to commit this blunder. The servant must observe certain limits and not even ask the young person about, or easily consent to listen to his secrets, or else:

He might himself be made to stumble by the revelations he hears.

He may drive the young person away when the latter discovers this spirit in him after a great deal of trouble.

They might both enjoy these conversations without making the least progress towards repentance.

The servant might become responsible for violating the sacrament of confession.

The young person might form a morbid attachment to his father confessor, relying on him for guidance in all matters, great and small.

Therefore, it is best for the servant to arm himself with the realization of his weakness, with purity of heart, with caution, and with the refusal to storm souls that Christ does not open up Himself. In that case, he is to be reserved and pure, humble and prayerful, so that the Lord will plant in this blessed heart he is ministering to the seeds and promises He wants and that He should lead him soon to the sacrament of confession.

4. The Objective of Ministering to Individuals:

Ministering to individuals is an opportunity for sharing the comfort that is engendered by the faith within us with those we minister to. It is not talk about being at a higher level or about a feeling of superiority, nor is it an attempt to forcibly capture souls. It is just a chance for both minister and charge to sit at the feet of the Lord, listening to His tender voice, deriving comfort from His filling presence, and receiving His blessed instructions. The servant is a means of conveying the presence of the Savior to the home and heart of the one he serves. And when the Lord of glory comes to the room through much prayer and supplication, both will make known their needs and receive what they want from Him in the way of repentance, grace, or solutions to problems.

The most capable of spiritual servants can with great effort suggest a solution to a problem. But it is impossible for him to impart the grace necessary for the practical implementation of the solution. That is why the Lord of Glory, through His Holy Spirit, reveals an essential element in individual ministry and reveals the main role of the servant: to pour himself out in prayer so that the Lord may speak

through him and comfort the one his is ministering to.

Third, The Methods of Ministering to Individuals:

There are important considerations:

Before the Visit:

When he leaves his home, the servant has to forget that he is a guide and director and throw himself at Christ's feet, acknowledging that he is weak, powerless, and negligent, asking the Lord's blessing on this opportunity for doing good granted to him and to those he is to visit. The only feeling that he is required to have is the clear one that he is the Lord's partner, that He is accompanying him and will come to that soul to do the work Himself. The Lord is to assume leadership and choose those whom he is to visit. He prepares them for this meeting, guiding them, comforting them, lighting their way, and living with them. The servant must be in a state of constant prayer throughout the visit.

2. *During the Visit:*

The minister also needs a spirit of constant prayer in the inner chamber of the heart throughout the visit. He is to take the lowest seat to give the Lord the chance to appear and minister. In this spirit of prayer, the blessed instructions and living words that his charge needs will be uttered.

The visit should not be an occasion to embarrass the youth about his lack of attendance at meetings, neither the occasion to invade his private life and to ask about his spiritual exercises. All these remarks should arise naturally and spontaneously, or they will have a contrary effect. Likewise, the visit is not an occasion to chatter about worldly matters, nor is it the time for vacuous religious discussions.

As soon as you enter the house, ask God to lead you and show you where to begin. The young person might begin with a useful spiritual discussion or he might bring a problem to your attention. Lead him to Christ's arms without going into many details, so that he might find rest there.

After the Visit:

Entrust all the souls of those you have visited to the grace of God, invoking His help for each according to his needs, confident that God loves them more than you do and that He will not forget them.

