

What Must I Do?

The Youth Minister as Spiritual Guide

by Michael Hryniuk

It's Sunday night at St. Anselmo's Catholic Church. Our young people are gathered in a circle around the candles that are ritually set out for every meeting by a different member of the group. This is our first meeting of the year, and our focus will be the sharing of our "sacred questions." My fellow team members and I have sought to create a space where the students feel free and safe to share the deepest questions of their hearts. After an opening prayer, I explain the process to the students and invite them into a time of silent reflection and journaling on these questions that they would ask God directly if they could. After 15 minutes of intense quiet and writing, the sharing begins.

The other adults and I sit mesmerized as we listen to our younger brothers and sisters pour out their hearts' deepest and most difficult questions. We discover that these questions are the same as our own: Why does God allow so much suffering and evil in the world? How do I deal with my own pain? What is true happiness, and how do I find it in my life? Why is it so difficult to give and receive love?

They flow from the greatest yearnings and sufferings of our hearts. As a community, we believe that the greatest gift we can offer our students is this safe and sacred space in which to struggle together with these spiritual questions and give whatever spiritual guidance we can. These questions will inspire and form the basis for all of our later discussions and sharing throughout the year. Rather than imposing a set curriculum or program, we seek to allow the Holy Spirit living in these questions of our youth ministry community to lead and guide the process organically. We trust that a "religion of the questions" will be more attractive and powerful than a "religion of the answers."

A Spiritual Dimension

What does the process of opening to these questions reveal about "relational ministry?" Relational ministry is usually understood as meeting the students "where they're at," building trust, earning the right to be heard, and getting on their level. This is good as far as it goes, but there is more to relational ministry. There's a spiritual dimension to relational ministry that calls for a quality of presence that recognizes and honors the young's need for authentic spiritual guidance. It means hearing and responding to them first as spiritual seekers who, like the rich young man in the synoptic gospels, asks Jesus the ultimate question: "Good Teacher, what I must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17, also Matthew 19:16 and Luke 18:18)

Beneath this question are all of the toughest issues kids can raise about life and how to live it well. Responding to these questions means relating to them at a level that goes much deeper than the social and recreational, or the level of study, discussion, and debate. It means getting past the cool indifference or the sometimes manic energy that covers our students' (and our own!) deepest yearnings and struggles.

As youth ministry professionals, we may feel an unconscious ambivalence or even reluctance to get this deep and vulnerable with them. Who are we to give spiritual guidance? We aren't gurus or spiritual masters like Jesus. We aren't trained spiritual directors or pastoral counselors. We may wonder what qualifies us to hold and carry these messy questions with our kids. To cover our ambivalence or even reluctance, we may be tempted to hide behind moral platitudes and gospel verses without revealing our own deepest questions and struggles. We may even seek to substitute high voltage and action packed relational ministries for listening, discerning, and responding to the still small voice of the Spirit. But doesn't God ask us to meet our kids on this holy ground? Isn't this where the Holy Spirit really seeks to transform minds and hearts?

If this is truly the core of relational ministry then what do we need to be present and responsive as spiritual guides, to create this space where presence before God alone is possible? In order to reflect on this question, it's helpful to look at Jesus himself in his encounter with the rich young man. There's more than "relational ministry" happening in this encounter—there's a transforming space that opens up between Jesus and the man that can hold and contain his deepest longing for wholeness. Jesus himself reveals that spiritual guidance flows from his spiritual authority, and that spiritual authority is also possible for all ministers of Christ when it's born from their own experience of attentive and obedient listening, looking, and responding to the Father in solitary prayer and in community.

Attentive Listening

It's clear that Jesus is, first and foremost, an attentive listener. In all of the gospel accounts, he responds to the young man's question with a question of his own: "Why do you call me good?" (Mark 10:18) Not only is there a profound humility in this remark, but there's also a sense that Jesus is giving his undivided attention to the man at that moment. He is fully present to the man. He's touched by the man's question in a way that's similar to his being touched by the woman with a hemorrhage (Luke 8:43), or moved with compassion in his encounter with the man with leprosy (Mark 1:41).

There's a depth to Jesus' listening that ministers are called to use when in relation with young people—a depth that finds its authority in their own personal experience of listening constantly to the Author of Life in solitude, silence, and prayer. Jesus speaks only words that have been given to him by the Father in the silence of prayer (John 12:49). The attention he gives to the young man is "sourced" and authorized in this presence to the Father. Our own experience of disciplined listening and attention to God in prayer and Scripture authorizes us to meet and listen to the sacred questions of our young people in the same way. Presence to God in the Word and in the silence empowers us for presence to them at the deepest level of their being.

Spiritual Authority

In Mark's gospel, we receive an important detail that reveals a second aspect of the spiritual authority of Jesus. After Jesus recites a litany of the commandments that lead to life, the man replies that he has kept all of these from his youth. Mark tells us at this point

that Jesus, looking at him, "loved him" (10:21). There's a moment of recognition here, a moment when Jesus sees deeply into the man's heart and the desire there for a wholeness and holiness that exceeds the bare minimum of the law and its prescriptions. There's a quality to the gaze of Jesus that every minister is called to, a gaze that's grounded in Jesus' experience of gazing deeply into the mystery of God's presence and being gazed upon by the very same look of love that he bestows.

Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). Like Jesus, youth ministers are called to do nothing on their own, but only what they see God doing in their own lives and hearts. They're called to look upon their students with the eyes of Jesus, with the gaze of love that sees into the students' hearts and opens them, as Jesus did with the young man. Such a gaze beholds them in their beauty and their struggle, and makes a safe space for what's most precious and sacred in them. This is possible only when ministers themselves allow for time and space in their own lives simply to ponder the mysterious presence of God within them and around them.

Authentic Responsiveness

Finally, we hear Jesus giving a penetrating and radical response to the question of the rich man: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). After listening from the heart and gazing upon the man with love, Jesus exercises the fullness of his spiritual authority by creating a space for a profound challenge—to follow him with no strings attached. The listening and looking empower Jesus to see clearly into the heart of the young man's spiritual situation. Jesus doesn't mince his words. With the diagnosis comes a treatment that, we discover, is more than the young man can bear, "for he had many possessions" (v.22). The authority with which Jesus challenges flows finally from his own authenticity and obedience to the Father; "for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise"(John 5:19).

We know how acutely sensitive young persons are to the authenticity of adults—especially their pastoral leaders. Our own spiritual authority to challenge the young to live the gospel depends, as with Jesus, on the extent to which we ourselves are attentive and responsive to the sacred struggles of our own life of discipleship. Do we talk about these struggles in the abstract? Do we spiritualize them? Or do we live them and share them in vulnerability, when appropriate, with the ones in our care? It's ultimately our own attempt to discern and obey that authorizes us to guide others along the way.

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The gospel accounts of Jesus' encounter with the rich man reveal that relational ministry is about more than gaining the trust and confidence of young people in order to communicate the gospel to them. The students in our ministry at St. Anselmo's are never more attentive than when others, especially the adult members of the community, are sharing openly about their spiritual questions and seeking guidance together in the Holy Spirit.

We're learning that authentic relational ministry is about creating the space for them to reveal their deepest questions and responding to those questions with the spiritual authority that flows from intimacy with God. The fruit of that intimacy is the capacity to listen with the ears of Christ, to see with the eyes of Christ, and to guide and challenge with the power of the Spirit.

These three capacities qualify us as ministers to offer the spiritual guidance that our young people desperately crave. It takes courage and discipline to claim this authority, but Jesus promises that "those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). We can depend upon this promise for the light and the wisdom to respond together to the deepest questions our young people have.