

## **The Holy Trinity as Relational Ministry Directive**

By David M. Bristow

Most familiar with parish youth work have heard of relational ministry. The concept refers to building relationships with young people by engaging them in a Christ-centered way. Through relational interaction comes increased sacramental presence and discipleship in the church's youth. Such relationality is intentional—it seeks active engagement with teenagers, developing healthy exchanges in the context of Christian living. As with Jesus's approach with Zacchaeus (see Lk. 19:5), there's a persistent drive for personal encounter within ministry, an ongoing summoning of young people to attain faithful purpose.

However, cultural trends in recent years have dampened the novelty and effectiveness of relational ministry practice. For starters, whereas relational ministry was relatively new in the 1970s it is now widespread. A cursory glance at any church mission statement shows how much relational ministry is incorporated into the very fabric of Christian practice. In fact, one is hard pressed to find any congregation or ministry that disavows the importance of intentional relationships. To complicate matters more, such focus on interpersonal relationality has crossed into most secular, political, and consumeristic ideologies.

This reality creates new challenges for coordinators of youth ministry. Young people are rightly suspicious of entering ministries that deploy relationships as a strategy or method to get to some other end—be it relationships with Christ or changing one's social-political viewpoints. Youth workers are now confronted with a most pressing task. They must develop vibrant and innovative relational practices that distinguish it from today's worldly movements while remaining faithful to the Church's sacred traditions and scriptures.

The following article uses the Trinity as a starting point for directing relational ministry. By no means exhaustive, the purpose of the endeavor is to cast the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit analogously, revealing three aspects of relational ministry practice. The importance of the Trinity is foundational since the Godhead exists in perfect relationship and love between the Divine Persons (1 Jn. 4:7). The doctrine shows how human identity is likewise relational—a result of being created in God's image (Gen .1:27). As such, the way Christians interact should be distinctive and creative because of this Trinitarian source.

### **I Believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven & Earth...**

A common theme in relational ministry is that its practitioners maintain relationships with the Lord. Spending time in personal prayer is essential for youth workers before relating to young people. This tends to be general knowledge even if it's the first lesson forgotten. That said, the ministerial gems associated with personal prayer often go unrecognized by many youth workers. In these instances, a youth worker spends time in prayer, but such meditation often lacks reflection concerning relational ministry endeavors.

The starting point for any relational reflection is the same as the Nicene Creed—God, the Father Almighty. There are two critical points to recall when the Creed is taken into consideration. The first is the ever-present reminder that youth workers aren't the primary creators of relational ministry. The Lord is the maker of all things and this includes all (holy) youth ministry programs. With this understanding arrives a sense of humility when doing relational work. Youth workers must know their place as creatures first, recognizing that young people are not products for personal glorification or changing the world. These youth are creatures belonging to the Creator—the Heavenly Father—the One all glory goes to and with whom all changes are made.

Secondly, praying before the Maker of all things allows space for creative reflection regarding relational ministry. Modern-liberal culture has often perpetuated the myth that innovation is a secular affair—that is, youth workers are either followers or rejecters of a given cultural trend, but never the *innovators*. The problem is this assumes genuine creativity comes from some other source besides the Lord. In the context of relational ministry, such reminds youth workers to develop innovative practices that foster healthy and holy relationships—and not simply rehashing old or secular ones.

For example, a youth ministry team creating ongoing connections with young people as a church-wide stimulus. Ministry nights occurred in houses of (compliant) parishioners that desired to serve young people in the spirit of biblical hospitality (see Gen. 18:1-15). Small groups of teenagers and youth workers would show up, eat, and then trade stories with the host family. Afterwards, group prayers would ensue followed by a blessing—all a product of parish discernment.

The above mindset captured Christ-centered sharing within a particular setting for the youth. True innovation arose because humble servants of prayer tapped into the Lord's directive. Relational ministry with young people can only benefit from these interludes of prayerful discernment. Youth workers cannot forget prayer's importance in remaining humble and innovative within the relational ministry fold.

### **I Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ... for Our Salvation He Came Down from Heaven....**

There's a mistaken assumption that youth workers should be themselves when doing relational ministry. This sentiment is understandable on some level—namely, don't pretend to be something you're not when relating to young people. However, the Church's tradition and scriptures consistently proclaim "participation" in the "divine nature" (2 Pt 1:3-4) as the goal of Christian life. In this sense, relational ministers are identified with Jesus Christ first—as sharing in His Eucharistic body and mission—a journey of ongoing transformation into divine life.

Notice the implications for relational ministry. When the youth worker's being is pointed to Christ their pursuits are transformed in all relational encounters. The goal of relational ministry here becomes the encounter with Jesus—both for the young person *and* the youth worker. Youth workers leave behind any ulterior agenda, be it changing a young person's non-belief-in-God or acquiring large crowds on ministry nights. Each of these deviations must be subsumed into Christ being *encountered* within all relationships.

Christ's incarnation testifies to this pursuit of encounter. Everything Jesus did as the 'God-man' was to accomplish his Father's saving will. This includes his earthly ministry in which Jesus engaged others in genuine relationship, often using parables and stories to reveal a new way of existing in the Lord. Likewise, youth workers draw teenagers into this same space by sharing their individual stories, gifts, and talents with them. Every encounter is meant to bring young people into Jesus's life even when it isn't specifically about the Christian faith.

This form of relational ministry saves ministries from befriending another as a human pursuit instead of a divine encounter. Such is the main distinction of relational ministry in the Church. Relationships are formed to know Jesus as a divine person instead of a new product or religious knowledge. The encounter of Jesus Christ serves as a peaceful invitation to share in the Lord's relationality *as the final goal*.

### **I Believe in the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life...**

Pentecost marks the day in which Jesus's disciples received the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Lord's message. This sending of the Holy Spirit commemorates the beginning of the Church's life. What many youth workers fail to recognize, however, is that the early church was as much a new network of personal connections as it was a space for sacramental worship. St Paul testifies to this fact in Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). This mindset connects various peoples of otherwise different social standings in ongoing sacramental participation.

Openness to the Holy Spirit should have the same effect today within youth ministries. Crafting a Spirit-led ministry entails forming healthy and holy interconnectivity amongst all ministry members. This is more than building "community"—an overused buzzword implying nothing more than shared ideas. Rather, Spirit-led ministry means genuine life together in the vein of a healthy family, complete with sharing in one another's joys, fears, gifts, faults, and goals. It also implies a distinctive way of engaging others as Christians.

Relational ministry forms all Christian livelihood. Of course, healthy and holy relational ministry is habit forming—which means it takes practice. A significant role of any parish youth coordinator is to ensure these habits are formed within the *entire* ministry corpus. In doing so, the love that flows from relational ministry practices moves outward with evangelistic vigor as in the early church (Acts 2:42-47).

The following four areas are starting points for creating a Spirit-led interconnectivity with young people. Youth workers should focus on each as a site of relational development (much like a healthy family dynamic).

1. Prayer / Catechesis: Healthy and engaging programs (spaces) are created for *doing* relational ministry well. Both teaching and prayer supplement healthy relationality. Teaching ensures young people understand the faith well enough so that they relate

properly to others and creation. Prayer (liturgy, adoration, meditation, etc.) connects youth to the source of all relationships—Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

2. **Table Fellowship:** Youth ministries must regularly dine together (as Jesus did with his disciples). Table fellowship quickly disarms people, gathering them in close quarters to share personal stories. Youth workers should maneuver young people into different table configurations of peers /adults. This emphasizes how each young person is called to engage others in Christ-like hospitality.
3. **Servanthood:** Every act of servanthood should bring young people together for relational engagement. The point of Christian charity is to strengthen relationships in Christ—not a checklist for service hours or to glorify / justify youth ministry to the wider parish. In planning any service event, youth workers assess how it forms healthy life together *in the ministry*, as a vibrant space for relationships to grow while serving others in the Lord.
4. **Recreational:** Similar to service, recreation with young people is directed toward positive relationships in Christ. Like a healthy family, young people must have space to relate during play and downtime. Ministry without ample recreation can limit the depth of connection that young people make with one another. Youth workers ensure recreation is life-giving and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

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