

Youth Ministers: Working with your Pastor

As in any relationship, communication is the most essential thing; and there is no more important relationship in youth ministry than that of the youth minister with his or her pastor. Good communication is based on understanding each other; and before we can make a relationship better, we have to understand what kind of relationship it is. Just as marriage is my vocation, ecclesial ministry is the pastor's vocation. So I help him, and I keep in my heart that I'm am serving *his* ministry, not leading my own.

This attitude is essential to have if you are going to effectively work with your pastor in youth ministry. It's important to remember that, though you and your pastor might have a friendship, when it comes to ministry you are never peers. Yes, you should share with him what is going on in the ministry, but he won't reciprocate by sharing everything that is going in the parish. He can't; much of it is confidential. You report to him, not the other way around.

As a youth minister, it is your job to be concerned about teens; but pastors have to deal with a much larger world than you do. From the serious to the mundane, people bring problems to your pastor with the anxiety that the world will end tomorrow if the issue wasn't resolved yesterday.

Being pastor is a tough job. You are only *part* of the puzzle of bringing salvation to his flock—an important part, but a part nonetheless. Consider it your job to make your pastor's life easier. He hired you to reach out to youth, to build the relationships that he can't, to understand the culture that he is confused by. Your job is to help him minister effectively to youth, to live out the commitment he made when he was ordained a priest.

But don't confuse 'making his job easier' with 'taking his job away from him'. He is still the *father*, the head of the family. I've seen too many youth groups that were all about the youth minister, but the youth minister is not a permanent fixture of the parish—a priest is.

It begins with an attitude adjustment. Your pastor's involvement may only constitute a small part of the ministry, but it will be an essential and significant part. Don't think of your pastor as someone who can help with youth ministry; think of how you can help your pastor by doing youth ministry, and how your pastor's time can be the most effectively and efficiently used to make a dramatic impact with the lives of teens.

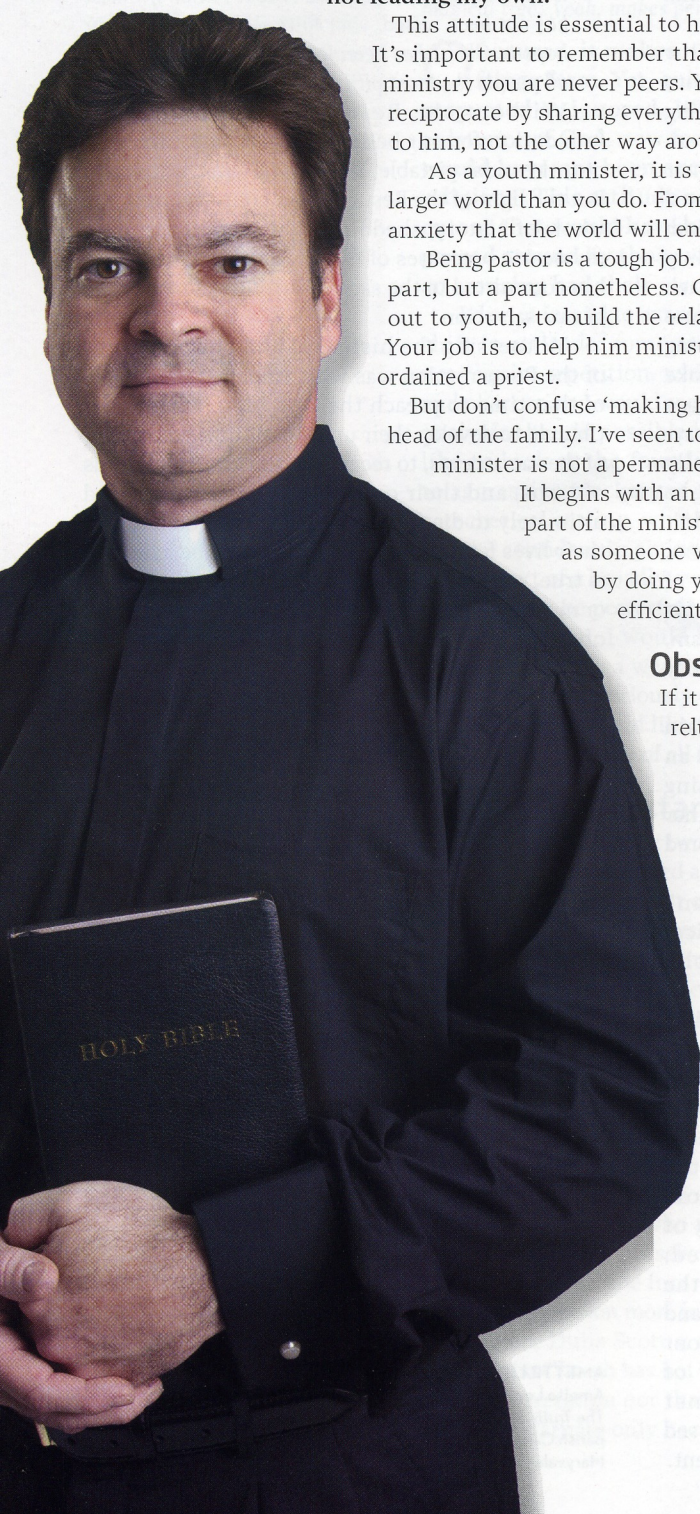
Obstacles

If it is the priest's responsibility to minister to teens, why are many of them so reluctant to do it? Here are some reasons:

- **Lack of understanding.** Most people in the culture still think of adolescence as a 'phase' as opposed to what it truly is: a transformative period of time that will determine the rest of their lives. Many priests fail to understand the significance of reaching a person in their teenage years.
- **Culture shock.** Teenagers are weird. Even their parents don't understand them. Priests are usually a bit more removed from culture than the average American, making them that much farther from the world of teens.
- **Time.** Teens are needy. They don't understand boundaries. You know what most of the parents in your parish are talking to your pastor about? Their teens. They're worried about them being sexually active, drinking too much, ruining their lives, fighting at home, etc. Teenagers scream 'high maintenance' and your pastor might worry that he doesn't have the time for them, especially with everything else going on in the parish.
- **Fear.** There are two kinds of fear in regards to teenagers. First, they are intimidating, especially when in a group. They have their own language, and it's easy to feel uncomfortable around them. It's hard enough as an adult to walk up to a group of teenagers and engage them in conversation. Imagine trying to do it wearing a priestly collar.

The other fear is in regards to the sexual scandal. Some priests steer clear of working personally with teenagers because they are afraid of how it might look and what others might say about it. It is a terrible burden to bear.

- **Personality.** Your pastor might be an anti-social nerd, more comfortable with his stamp collection or civil war figurines than real people. It happens.



- **Burnout.** Yes, youth ministers aren't the only ones who burnout. However, youth ministers can get another career, priests cannot. To me there is nothing sadder than this. Some priests start with great zeal but get quickly overwhelmed with parish life and just try to keep their heads down and survive. These are the priests we need to pray for.

The good news is that you can help your pastor overcome a lot of these obstacles. You can help them understand the importance of adolescence. You can explain some elements of youth culture so it doesn't seem so foreign. You can schedule him in places that would be the most effective use of his time. The more you can help him have positive interaction with teenagers, the less fearful he'll become.

United we stand

There will always be moments of disagreement, but there are far greater things to be united on. What is this ministry about? It's not budgets, volunteers or flyers.

It's teenagers.

The devil would have us quickly lose that focus and spend lots of energy and emotion into unimportant things. So I made it a constant focus to talk about teens. Suzy came to our youth group last night and asked some great questions. John finally came back to youth group and I had a great discussion with him. Tim, our adult volunteer, gave a great witness that he worked hard on, and the teens really responded to it.

Sometimes we'd laugh; sometimes we'd cry, but I always made sure to talk about *people* before we talked about business. It united us and gave purpose to our time together.

But at the end of the day, the foundation of our unity was we understood our relationship: he was the pastor; I was the youth minister. I served *him*, and put a lot of energy into helping him do better ministry with teenagers.

He was rarely at the youth group meetings, but when he was I made it count. He was not the 'coolest' guy in the world, but I let him know what was going on in youth culture and encouraged him to be himself. In short, I helped him effectively minister to the teens of his parish. And, as pastor, that's what he wanted to do.

No matter what kind of relationship you have with your pastor, I'm sure it can get better. It's worth all the effort you put into it, because there is no more important relationship in Catholic youth ministry than the one between the pastor and the youth minister. ■

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Affirm him. But many priests don't realize how valuable they are. In fact, more than a few priests have shared with me that they feel intimidated by their youth minister's ability to connect so easily with teens, while they feel like they have a hard time. Encourage him, compliment him, thank him, and give good feedback when he helps out.

Think beyond the sacraments. If your only desire is to have him celebrate Mass or hear Confessions, does that really respect his gifts of authority? Yes, you need him to be sacramentally available for the youth. But is that all? I've spoken to priests who feel insulted by youth ministers who think the only thing they have to offer is sacramental grace.

Set him up for success. You need to be very intentional with your pastor's time and put him in places where he can have the most impact. Bad: 'Father, why don't you come to the youth night tonight and hang out?' Good: 'Father, can you come to the beginning of our youth night and start us off with a blessing? The meeting begins at 7pm and you'd be done by 7:15.'

Speak positively about your pastor. Don't say negative things about the pastor, even jokingly. Will you be frustrated with decisions your pastor makes? Of course you will. What employee expects to agree 100% with their boss? I'm not suggesting you bottle up all your frustrations, but find someone (a friend, a spouse) outside the situation you can talk to about it. Never badmouth the pastor to your volunteers, and *especially* not your teens or their parents. Your goal is to lift him up, not tear him down.

Be a professional. Just because you spend time with teens doesn't mean you have to act like one. Be on time for your meetings with him and the staff. Don't wear what you'd wear to a high school basketball game to a meeting in his office. Follow through with commitments—take notes at the meeting! The more you act like a professional, the more you'll be treated like one.