

Responding to Criticism

Rev. Timothy Puls

“Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning” (Proverbs 9:8).

As I sat in my college English class waiting for my teacher to return our latest assignments, I was confident. I was self-assured. Some may even say I was smug. After all, I did put in quite a few hours in the library researching the topic. I had taken a whole weekend to rewrite, proofread, and type what I was sure would be an A paper. As the professor reached my desk, I smiled up at her, secretly waiting for her nod of approval on a job well done. Well, here it was, the moment of truth. I looked down at my paper. I had never seen so many red marks in my life. Beaming brightly like a neon light at the top of my paper was the unexpected grade of C. How could this be? Didn't she know how much time I had spent on this? Oh, I would like to see her do better. I was angry.

Later that evening, after the shock had worn off, I took out my paper and began reading the comments. As much as I hated to admit it, she had very valid points. This constructive criticism was exactly what I needed in order to become a better writer, reader, student, and eventually pastor. The more I read, the more thankful I was. Some of the grammar mistakes I had made were the same ones I had been making for years. Now, I not only knew why I was making these errors, but I knew how to correct them. The refining of my writing helped me in college, seminary, and especially in the ministry.

Although criticism is painful and a blow to the old sinful man, it helps shape and mold you to be the kind of person God wants you to be. Jesus said in John 15, “I am the vine you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him he will bear much fruit but apart from Me you can do nothing.” Our Lord often speaks to each of us through the voice of others, words of Law and words of Gospel. And although the Law prunes, the Gospel bears fruit. Just as the life of the branch is found in the Vine, so our life is rooted to Christ in Holy Baptism. When we were grafted into Christ, we were like wild fruitless saplings; we were nothing on our own. Yet the Holy

Spirit, through water and the Word, attached us to something far more beautiful and fruitful than we would ever be. He attached us to Christ, our forgiveness, redemption, and our life now and forever. Now, I understand that it's on account of the fact that I no longer live but Christ who lives in me, as St. Paul says. The ability to reach out into the lives of others grows when the obstacles—namely our sinful selves—are removed from the path of the one who fills us in every way: Jesus Christ.

As a pastor and a Dean of Students, I am sometimes placed in a role that is uncomfortable to all of us. That is the role of sharing constructive criticism with seminarians. Criticism in itself is never the end goal or purpose. Like pruning of branches, criticism is to be taken in a positive and loving way that will help you to grow and bear fruit. When we are able to look at our flaws and mistakes in a positive way and make changes, it will benefit not only us but also those around us. When we, as servants of Christ, realize that we are flawed, it makes us more fully equipped to serve others in Christ's name. "Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning." That is what going to seminary is all about: entrusting yourself to others in order to "be wiser still." Pastoral formation happens when we are in contact with both those who lead us and those who stand beside us along the way. It means being shaped and formed by loving people who walk us through the difficult paths and lovingly guide and support us along the way.

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