

"The Quality of Attentiveness"

"They have no wine." (John 2:3)

Attentiveness to the needs of the "other" is a pastoral quality. If this quality is not naturally part of our character, then we need to ask the one true Pastor of souls to cultivate it in us.

I am reminded of Mary's role at the marriage celebration in Cana of Galilee. Both she and her son were invited. After they arrived, Mary noticed that the wine had run short: "They have no wine," she observed. Her concern was for the welfare of the newly married couple; she didn't want them to be embarrassed.

Her words to her son, "They have no wine" simply stated fact. She didn't pose her observation as a request. Nor were her words judgmental or critical. She merely stated her observation, cloaked in concern. Although her remark gave Jesus the opportunity to raise the conversation to another level—relating the earthly wine to the new wine of the kingdom—He did not miss the practical point. The wedding celebration included both the wine that gladdened the heart and the Spirit that gladdened the soul. Mary was attentive. She was sensitive to the need at hand, at a particular moment.

In his wonderful little manual entitled, "*The Orthodox Pastor*," John Shahovskoy, former Archbishop of San Francisco and the West (OCA) and Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, observed:

A good pastor knows his farm, understands the processes of organic life and knows how to further them. *He looks at every plant and takes care of it* [emphasis mine]. His work is to prepare and till the soil, to sow seed, to water the plants, to weed, to graft good stock onto wild stock, to spray the vines, to protect the fruit from thieves and birds, to watch over its ripening and harvest it in due season...

Although some pastors may be gifted visionaries, able to see the bigger picture, all pastors must be attentive to detail. And, all of us involved in pastoral care—fathers and mothers of the Church—must be observant and attentive to the needs of others in the moment.

Are we aware of and concerned for the "other"? I am not referring to global awareness or concern, although we cannot neglect the needy in the world—Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and so many places. Instead, I am referring to persons we meet daily; at this level attentiveness often breaks down.

So many of us are naturally self-absorbed; it is our usual state of mind, and we rarely look beyond our own responsibilities and needs. Scales cover our eyes and blind us to the person in the apartment or dorm room next door, or in the seat beside us in table in the refectory.

Sometimes, we retreat from involvement with the "other" because we are frightened by the possibility of a further burden. Oftentimes our own biases and critical judgment prevent us from doing so. Or, perhaps, we sense our inability and inadequacy to help another person. We all experience these fears, whether our vocation lies within the sacramental or the royal priesthood.

Over the years, I have witnessed the quality of attentiveness in many of our students, staff, and faculty. But if we regularly retreat from awareness and concern, we can ask the Lord to help cultivate these qualities in our hearts.

A grave mistake for pastors (or for any Christian) is gravitation toward only persons whom they like, with whom they get along, or who support them. Accusations of creating a clique will emerge within a community—and rightly so. We need to begin— even in small ways—to watch, observe, and seek out those who show signs of isolation, or sadness, or anger. In this way, the qualities of Christ himself, and of his mother, will steadily grow in us.

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