

Confrontation and hesitation

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August 29, 2011

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The early church fathers had a saying: "The best bishop is a bad bishop." In other words, we sometimes grow more through adversity than we do by encouragement and supportive spiritual direction.

When I was experiencing a lot of conflict in a particular church, a wise pastor shared this saying with me and told me to substitute "congregation" for "bishop." His advice: don't be so quick to solve problems and get rid of the suffering. If we learn obedience by the things that we suffer, as Jesus did, real growth may involve weathering the storms of unjust criticism and false charges. Those who sinfully inflict pain may be used by God to nurture us in holiness.

I didn't like the advice then, and I don't like it now. Like the sons of thunder, I'd prefer to call down fire.

At times our failure to confront is cowardly and puts the sinner at risk. Humble confrontation can be an act of mercy that leads to true repentance and real restoration. But other times, holding people accountable can be a euphemism for "getting even." When log-in-my-own-eye zeal detects a tiny specks in my brother's eye, I am jeopardizing both my brother's spiritual growth and my own.

Paul's advice is critical here. Our prayer ought to be that our "love abounds more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-11).

There is a difference between the hesitation produced by apathy and avoidance and the hesitation prompted by humility and prayer. Confrontation requires discernment.