

## THE MINISTRY OF ACTIVITY AND PRESENCE

*Tim Williams CM  
December 1, 2014*

### **If only ..... !**

We have all heard the saying "Youth is wasted on the young !". This of course is not very flattering to those who consider themselves as still young ! The French extend the idea and put it in a more balanced way by saying: "si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait !" <sup>1</sup>, which in English implies something like "if the young already knew ....., if the elderly still could.... ". While this might be a catchy expression, it does not always mirror the reality of the world in which we live . But on the other hand..... ?

### **Activity and Presence in Church Ministry**



The idea of our world population being divided into two clear cut groups - those who have not yet been able to learn from experience and those who do not have the strength to do what they would like to do, is not something that has to be forced upon us. But nonetheless, there is still the tendency in many areas to think this way. I have in mind here attitudes towards "activity" and "presence" in Church Ministry where some see frenetic activity when we are young as the only way to do real ministry, and the ministry of being present to others as being left for when we are too old to do anything else. As I see it, both of these aspects of Ministry are very important and should not be seen as so unrelated that they can be reserved totally to particular age groups.

Church Ministry often involves some form of activity, that is, we carry out certain functions in the service of people and of Church. The ministry we are involved in may be liturgical, pastoral, administrative, academic, acting in leadership roles, and a whole range of things that require us to engage in physical, mental and religious activity. But physical activity alone should not be the totality of our ministry, regardless of our age. Without a sense of being present to people to whom we are ministering, our ministry may be less effective and become purely functional. Sometimes the importance of our presence is masked by a flurry of activity. Should we not, whatever age we are, take the time to reflect on the effectiveness of our presence to others in ministry, on whether it is, for example, truly collaborative, enabling and empowering? Or is the activity more designed to satisfy ourselves ? Even if we have the energy to carry out the functions of ministry tirelessly, it may not be real ministry unless we bring a sense of presence and formation (for others, and for ourselves) to the ministry we carry out. We do not need to wait until we are unable to expend physical energy in order to be present to people. Presence to others should be part of all our ministry no matter how old or how young we are.



---

<sup>1</sup> Grandville, J J (Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard), *Cent Proverbes*, 1845.

Many will have the wisdom, even while young, to understand that people who work full time in ministry also need to have other interests in their lives beyond the activity of ministry - social interests, recreational interests, even hobbies and ways of relaxing. These things will make us more balanced in our ministry, and more effective in being present to others. These activities beyond ministry are not a waste of time and will also serve us well, not only in avoiding burnout, but also in supporting us when we are no longer able to carry out full time ministry, and may help to avoid loss of meaning in life, boredom, loss of sense of value of what we are worth.

As we grow older, we may indeed find that we have less physical and mental energy to expend in ministry, but that doesn't mean we have lost our value. Many people of course begin to slow down gradually, realising that frenetic activity is not the only way to minister to others. They also recognise the need to take time to consider their own limitations, to look after themselves physically, mentally and spiritually, and to recognise that aging is a natural process, not a catastrophe.

### **A word from Vincent de Paul**

Having said all that, even when we are compelled to restrict our physical activity because of age, what a gift it is to have more time to listen actively to people, to support them, to accompany them, and just to be with them in their different situations. And still using our physical, mental and spiritual capacities for ministry as much as we can, albeit with some limitations. Those who are in this situation make a valuable contribution to the lives of others. In his early sixties, Vincent de Paul himself said to the members of the Congregation of the Mission during a Repetition of Prayer:

*Someone may also make excuses for himself because of his age. As for me, despite my age, before God I don't feel excused from the obligation I have to work for the salvation of those poor people; for what could prevent me from doing so? If I couldn't preach every day, "eh bien", I'd do it twice a week! If I couldn't give long sermons, I'd try to give short ones; if, again, people didn't understand me at those short ones, what would prevent me from speaking plainly and simply to those good people in the way I'm speaking to you right now, gathering them around me, as you are?<sup>2</sup>*

If we see both activity and presence being important in a life of ministry, a shift in the emphasis we place on these aspects of ministry does not have to be something traumatic. Rather it is part of the continuing change that goes on in our lives.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>2</sup> Coste CM, Pierre, *St Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, "No 100 - Repetition of Prayer - October 25, 1643", New City Press, New York 2008, Vol XI, p 123,

## FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you ever been in the situation where continuous activity in ministry and service to others prevented you from serious reflection about the quality of your ministry ?
2. If you are in the situation where you do not have the energy to cope with continuously active ministry, do you see your own presence to others as being a ministry in itself ?

\*\*\*\*\*



\*\*\*\*\*