

Handling Criticism

All leaders are subject to criticism – sometimes constructive and sometimes virulent. This is especially true of a vocation where people have titles, wear uniforms, adhere to a strict code of behavior, teach truth and morality and publicly wear a cross. According to St. John Chrysostom, “All men are ready to pass judgement on the priest as if he was not a being clothed with flesh, or one who inherited a human nature.”

Criticism is universal and inevitable. Every priest knows that if he doesn’t learn to deal with criticism, he’s in for a long and painful term of service – decades! Some insulate themselves by denial or counterattack. Yet criticism can be exceedingly useful if one is sufficiently charitable or objective enough as to accept it when valid. What do those well-versed in human interactive behavior suggest? Here are six questions for reflection, ten recommendations and five suggested responses.

Six Questions to Ask Oneself Concerning Criticism

1. Is it really about me? Does this parishioner struggle with authority in general? Do they have long simmering resentments toward their actively alcoholic, abusive and absent father that they are unknowingly dragging into their relationship with me? Are they simply misinformed?
2. Am I globalizing one person’s negative and unfair criticism and ignoring the far greater number of people who are generally positive about my service? Experts say that globalizing an incident into all aspects of one’s life is one of the primary causes of depression and that localizing it to its proper context preserves inner peace and makes it possible to “move on” rather quickly.
3. Am I reacting from my gut rather than calmly choosing how I will respond? What should be my response?
4. Have I heard and understood this person’s comment correctly? Should I calmly repeat back to them what I think they are saying to me so as to gain greater clarification and also help them to possibly gain some objectivity in what may have been expressed as a deeply subjective personal slight?
5. Am I interpreting this correctly? Is it really negative and destructive criticism or actually something helpful to me? Is it possible for me to accept that this criticism is valid? That this is something that I need to work on? Or apologize for?
6. Do I chronically and unmercifully judge myself? If so, this will often result in hypersensitivity, defensiveness and counterattack when people offer any form of criticism of me.

The Ten Suggestions Regarding Criticism

1. Pause, even if ever-so-briefly, and try to catch a glimpse of them through God's eyes – that He loves and accepts them unconditionally.
2. Repeat back to them what you heard them say but do it calmly, fairly and without exaggeration, defensiveness or aggression.
3. In quiet moments of reflection can I acknowledge that like them, I also unfairly criticize people, otherwise known as judging them.
4. Consider making positive criticism, otherwise known as “feedback”, part of the culture. For those who dare, when next conducting an all-parish survey ask for feedback on your ministry. Ask for fair, but honest suggestions for improvement and also what parishioners feel is being done well. And for those who *truly* dare, publish the responses in the newsletter.
5. Accept and admit when mistakes or made, or worse, when inappropriate behavior occurs, and that now it is time to sincerely apologize.
6. Anticipate criticism when attempting change in the parish or launching new initiatives. This is inevitable. Oftentimes, good communications prior to change can greatly reduce parishioner discomfort and thus, negative criticism.
7. Differentiate between WHAT you are and WHO you are. This is not easy for any professional – doctor, general, politician or priest. What you are goes to titles, duties, accomplishments, achievements, tasks, etc. Who you are goes to a theological understanding of Orthodox anthropology – origin, purpose and destiny. “My origin is that I was created in the image and likeness of a wise, loving and compassionate God; my purpose is to lovingly praise, glorify, worship and serve God and others as best as I can; my yearned for destiny in Christ is to be a partaker of divine nature journeying eternally from glory to glory together with all the saints.”
8. Constructive criticism is a gift often lovingly offered by someone who really cares about your well- being and wants you to be effective in your ministry and personally fulfilled. Yet something touching a sensitive topic or aspect of your personality that you are working on can lead to defensiveness. Try to discern these constructive comments as opportunities to learn and to improve. Thank the friend who offers this suggestion.
9. Concerning constant critics, try to embrace Guy de Maupassant's famous observation, “To know a person's whole story makes it possible to forgive everything.”
10. If genuinely injured and not indulging in self-pity, attend to self-care. As Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Call a friend. Take a walk. Write a series of personal affirmations. Compose a gratitude list. Listen to music. Exercise. Pray. Read the Psalms for they are “the song of the soul to God.”

Five Possible Verbal Responses to Criticism

1. Making steady eye contact and in a non-aggressive tone, say: "So, what you're saying is...", and put the criticism in your own words. The goal here is to take the focus away from any personality clash, and place it squarely on substantive issues. If it can be done humbly and calmly, it's actually a deft way of turning the other cheek.
2. "From my perspective...", or, "I can see how you might get that idea, but I probably haven't properly explained why ..." This establishes respect as a key element of the conversation.
3. "That's certainly something to think about going forward, and I appreciate the feedback." This presents you as someone genuinely trying to do the best job possible – and places the focus on future interactions.
4. Be lovingly assertive by finding your voice and speaking your truth. Assertive statements begin with "I feel..." Aggressive statements often begin with "You should..." Try it.
5. "Thank you for your feedback. I know you have the best interest of the parish at heart. Do you have any suggestions for me? I'll work on it. Perhaps we can talk about this again in the future."