

The Power of a Compliment



Thomas Aquinas once suggested that it's a sin to not give a compliment to someone when it's deserved because by withholding our praise we're depriving that person of the food that he or she needs to live on. He's right. Perhaps it's not a sin to withhold a compliment but it's a sad impoverishment, both for the person deserving the compliment and for the one withholding it.

We don't live on bread alone. Jesus told us that. Our soul too needs to be fed and its food is affirmation, recognition, and blessing. Every one of us needs to be healthily affirmed when we do something well so as to have resources within us with which to affirm others. We can't give what we haven't got! That's self-evident. And so, for us to love and affirm others we must first be loved, first be blessed, and first be praised. Praise, recognition, and blessing build up the soul.

But complimenting others isn't just important for the person receiving the compliment, it's equally important for the person giving it. In praising someone we give him or her some needed food for their soul; but, in doing this, we also feed our own soul. There's a truth about philanthropy that holds true too for the soul: We need to give to others not just because they need it but because we cannot be healthy unless we are giving ourselves away. Healthy admiration is a philanthropy of the soul.

Moreover, admiring and praising others is a religious act. Benoit Standaert submits that "giving praise comes out of the roots our existence." What does he mean by that?

In complimenting and praising others, we are tapping into what's deepest inside us, namely, the image and likeness of God. When we praise someone else then, like God creating, we are breathing life into a person, breathing spirit into them. People need to be praised. We don't live on bread alone, and we don't live on oxygen alone either.

The image and likeness of God inside us is not an icon, but an energy, the energy that's most real inside us. Beyond our ego, wounds, pride, sin, and the pettiness of our hearts and minds on any given day, what's most real within us is a magnanimity and graciousness which, like God, looks at the world and wants to say: "It is good! It is very good!" When we're at our best, our truest, speaking and acting out of our maturity, we can admire. Indeed, our willingness to praise others is a sign of maturity, and vice versa. We become more mature by being generous in our praise.

But praise is not something we give out easily. Mostly we are so blocked by the disappointments and frustrations within our lives that we give in to cynicism and jealousy and operate out of these rather than out of our virtues. We rationalize this of course in different ways, either by claiming that what we're supposed to admire is juvenile (and we're too bright and sophisticated to be impressed) or that the admirable act was done for someone's self-aggrandizement and we're not going to feed another person's ego. However, more often than not, our real reason for withholding praise is that fact that we ourselves have been insufficiently praised and, because of that, harbor jealousies and lack the strength to praise others. I say this sympathetically, all of us are wounded.

Then too in some of us there's a hesitation to praise others because we believe that praise might spoil the person and inflate his or her ego. Spare the rod and spoil the child! If we offer praise it will go to that person's head. Again, more often than not, that's a rationalization. Legitimate praise never spoils a person. Praise that's honest and proper works more at humbling its recipient than spoiling him or her. We can't be loved too much, only loved wrongly.

But, you might ask, what about children who end up self-centered because they're only praised and never disciplined? Real love and real maturity distinguish between praising those areas of another's life that are praiseworthy and challenging those areas of another's life that need correction. Praise should never be undeserved flattery, but challenge and correction are only effective if the recipient first knows that he or she is loved and properly recognized.

Genuine praise is never wrong. It simply acknowledges the truth that's there. That's a moral imperative. Love requires it. Refusing to admire when someone or something merits praise is, as Thomas Aquinas submits, a negligence, a fault, a selfishness, a pettiness, and a lack of maturity. Conversely, paying a compliment when one is due is a virtue and a sign of maturity.

Generosity is as much about giving praise as about giving money. We may not be stingy in our praise. The 14th century Flemish mystic, John of Ruusbroec, taught that "those who do not give praise here on earth shall be mute for all eternity."

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