 Reading time: 4 min.

Humility and Charity in the Education and Evangelisation of Young People

In chapter 14 of Luke's Gospel, we find the account of Jesus accepting an invitation to dine at the house of an important Pharisee. Jesus enters a space dense with social calculations and superficial religious attitudes where the dinner, in effect, becomes a theatre of human ambition, where guests vie for positions that reflect their perceived status and importance.
Jesus, always a keen observer of human nature, transforms this moment of social manoeuvring into a profound teaching on the very foundations of Christian discipleship.
Let us try to understand how this situation speaks to us who are engaged in the education and evangelisation of young people. How often do we too find ourselves conditioned by certain traits that Jesus calls by name: the subtle competition for recognition and influence; the desire to appear the best among all. I believe that the Pharisee's dinner becomes a mirror for our ministerial and pastoral contexts, challenging us to examine our motivations, our methods, and our daily choices.

The problem: false illusions of prominence
Jesus notes how the guests choose the places of honour, revealing a fundamental human tendency that goes far beyond dinner etiquette. This race for the first places exposes what we might call "the illusion of prominence"—the false belief that our worth and effectiveness are measured by the recognition, status, and honours that others bestow upon us.
It is an illusion that is also a trap for us educators involved in youth ministry. It is a temptation that manifests itself in numerous ways. We might find ourselves seeking the appreciation of parents, the recognition of administrators, or the gratitude of students. We might unconsciously compete with colleagues for the label of "most effective teacher" or the reputation of "youth worker whom everyone loves." The desire for prominence can subtly infiltrate our mission, transforming what should be selfless service into performance, following our own agenda.
Let us not forget that the illusion of prominence is particularly dangerous when working with young people because they, possessing acute sensitivity to authenticity, immediately perceive when adults use them as means for personal validation rather than genuinely investing in their integral growth. When we operate from the illusion of prominence, we inadvertently teach young people that relationships are transactional and utilitarian, that love must be earned through

performance, and that others are stepping stones for our personal ambitions.

The first teaching: choosing the last place

Jesus' instruction to take the lowest place rather than presuming honour represents more than a social strategy—it requires a fundamental reorientation of the heart. True humility is not self-abasement or false modesty, but rather an accurate understanding of our position before God and in relation to others.

In educational and pastoral contexts, choosing the last place means approaching young people without the presumption that our age, experience, or position automatically grants us authority or respect. It means being willing to learn from them, to be surprised by their insights, and to recognise when we do not have answers. This humility creates space for an authentic relationship to emerge.

When we choose the last place, we model for young people what it means to live without the constant need for external validation so common today in the era of social networks. We demonstrate that our identity and our worth do not depend on recognition or success, but stem from our relationship with God, which brings forth healthy choices in favour of others. This becomes particularly powerful for adolescents, who are often trapped in cycles of performance anxiety and peer comparison.

The second teaching: practical charity

Jesus then moves from commenting on personal humility to proposing structural charity: inviting "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" rather than those who can repay represents a radical resetting of the relationship based on giving rather than exchange.

Too often, our energy and attention gravitate towards young people who are easier to deal with, more responsive to our efforts, or who make us appear successful. We naturally invest in relationships that provide positive feedback and visible results. Jesus calls us to a completely different calculation. He challenges us to seek out those who cannot enhance our reputation or advance our programmes—the struggling student, the socially awkward teenager, the young person from a difficult background, the one whose questions challenge our comfortable assumptions. These are the ones who most need our investment and who can teach us most about the nature of unconditional love.

Humility and charity: two movements of the same heart

The genius of Jesus' teaching lies in connecting these two movements—personal humility and practical charity—as expressions of the same spiritual reality. Humility without charity remains self-centred, potentially becoming a form of spiritual pride.

Charity without humility can become paternalistic or manipulative, serving our need to feel useful rather than genuinely meeting the needs of others.
True humility opens us to see young people not as projects to fix or raw material for our programmes, but as beloved children of God with intrinsic dignity and unique gifts. This recognition naturally leads to charitable action—not charity as pity or condescension, but charity as recognition of our fundamental interconnectedness and mutual need.

Conclusion: the radical invitation

Jesus' teaching at the Pharisee's dinner issues a radical invitation to all of us: to find our identity not in the recognition we receive but in the love we give, not in the honours bestowed upon us but in our faithful service to those who cannot repay us. For educators and youth workers, this invitation becomes both a challenge and a promise—the challenge to examine our deepest motivations, and the conviction that faithful service, even when unnoticed or unappreciated, participates in God's transformative work in the world.
By choosing humility and practising charity, we not only serve young people more fruitfully but also embody the very gospel we seek to share. We become living witnesses of an original way, where greatness is found in service, beauty is in giving oneself, and joy is felt in the flourishing of others. This is the most powerful evangelisation of all: lives that testify, with joyful humility and genuine charity, to the reality they proclaim.