

1. Sidestep the Triangle

If another member of the Church sins against you,
go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.

—Matthew 18:15

I was first called out on it in the dean's office. I was a student in theology and the dean had often helped me fix my problems—the two courses that overlapped in my schedule, a snafu in my research assistant paycheck. This time it was a professor. Something had occurred in class that was just bizarre—behavior that seemed inappropriate, and I was uncomfortable.

“Did you talk to him about it?” she asked.

“No,” I said, puzzled. “Why would I?”

“Because before I hear about it, he should have the opportunity to explain himself directly to you.”

“You mean you think I should go talk to him *in person*?”

“It would be the Christian thing to do.”

Well, here was a whole new way of looking at the world for me. It would be the *Christian* thing to confront someone? Someone with authority?

“But he is a professor.”

“Mhmm. So?”

Long pause.

“Do I have to?”

“No, but I think it would be a kindness to him if you would. I doubt he knows you are even upset about it. It’d be good information for him to have. If afterward it seems unresolved and you want to come back, you can, but I won’t get involved until you’ve spoken to him directly.”

Suddenly, I wasn’t sure that I cared all that much about the incident. Maybe it wasn’t *that* bad. Well, not so bad that it merited a face-to-face conversation. I didn’t like what had happened, but I liked the idea of discussing it with him even less. Maybe it’d be best to just let it drop. Maybe it would be best to find someone else to talk about the incident with . . . like someone who would be on my side.

But after the dean’s words, how could I? She’d nailed a dynamic that was omnipresent in my life but that no one had ever pointed out to me before: triangulation.

The term *triangulation* appears to have been first coined by American psychiatrist Murray Bowden, a professor at Georgetown University in the mid-to late-twentieth century. He used it to describe the

propensity for two persons in a conflicted relationship to draw in a third person in hopes of easing the tension. Many since Bowden have used the same term to also describe efforts that draw in additional parties to escalate the tension by creating “camps” of supporters.

In triangulated relationships, there are three roles to be played: the person who initiates the drawing in of a third party, the third party, and the absent party who is the topic of the conversation and presented in a negative light. Although these terms have some problematic connotations, for simplicity’s sake, the parties are often referred to in literature as the victim, rescuer, and villain.¹

Why do we triangulate? Why do we cast people in these roles?

The most obvious answer is that it is easier than the alternative. Most of us hate conflict. If given the choice of chickenpox or speaking directly and honestly to someone with whom we are upset, we’d choose chickenpox.

We rationalize our avoidance by saying things like, “It wouldn’t do any good,” “It’s not worth bringing up,” or “It’ll blow over.” But the reality is that direct conversation is awkward. It is anxiety-producing. And besides, conflict makes us feel lousy not just about the other person but about *ourselves*. The more times I can tell the story aloud from my point of view to someone sympathetic, the clearer it becomes in *my* head as to why I did what I did and how I had only the best of

intentions. The messy details about me get sanitized. I want the third party to tell me that I am not the problem so that I can begin to live comfortably with *myself* again.

Research postulates, however, an additional hypothesis: triangulation pollinates most freely in fields that are hard to till. Clinical psychologist Ted Dunn observes: "Victims and rescuers resort to such informal structures because, for whatever reason, the formal structures of an organization have failed to provide them with the kind of influence they need or think they deserve. . . . Conflicts go underground and cannot be openly or successfully addressed. The formal structures and channels are no longer used or trusted as venues for the real conversations."²

In sum, Dunn concludes, "There are two general conditions that give rise to the formation of triangles: (1) conflict avoidance and (2) a covert attempt to garner power through others."³

Dunn's observation helps illumine why triangulation appears as the *modus operandi* in so many Christian communities. As described in the introduction, we are socialized from infancy to associate conflict with sin—i.e., always to be avoided. But furthermore, we worship and live in a larger structure where certain voices have more weight than others, not just by happenstance but often by design. For better or worse, ordained and lay members of the Church, male and female members of the Church, and older and younger

members of the Church have differing degrees of access to the formal structures and channels of the Church where decisions are made, thereby creating an environment in which alternative modes of attempted influence flourish. I suspect the greater the sense of exclusion from decision-making power in a community, the greater the temptation to triangulate conflict.

So if triangulation is a creative way by which we can avoid having uncomfortable conversations with each other and still have some influence in the community, why stop? Because triangulation comes with tremendous costs. As my dean first made clear to me, it violates human dignity because it doesn't give one the opportunity to explain one's own actions or to hear what is being said by others. It violates the principle of subsidiarity that encourages problems to be addressed at the lowest level possible, by the people most directly involved, before others are brought into the picture. And, finally, it has costs for the wider community. It spreads mistrust, discontent, and often division, creating a toxic atmosphere. Problems aren't addressed and solved but linger like a low-grade fever. As a colleague once observed after I'd liberally vented all my irritations, "Ann, you want your anger to be like a coursing stream and not a finely diffused mist."

Given those costs, the better question to ask might be: Is there a way to become more comfortable at directly addressing conflict and more capable of exerting influence in transparent ways? That will be

the topic of the remainder of this book. But first, what to do when you realize you are in a triangle as victim, rescuer, or villain?

When You Are the Victim

All of us get frustrated and angry at one time or another, and it is totally normal to share those feelings with close family members and friends. What makes it problematic is when the third party we share those stories with is also connected in some way with the villain in our episode, especially if we are asking this third party to take sides or get involved in the conflict in some way.

The spiritual challenge for the victim entails gathering your courage as best as you can to go talk directly to the person who has hurt or angered you. If that frightens you to the core and you want to talk to someone else about it first to get some coaching for how to have the conversation, that is fine, but give yourself the following parameters for the conversation:

- Don't say anything *about* the absent party that you wouldn't be willing to share *with* the absent party directly.
- Keep the focus on what *you* might do in the relationship, not what the third party or absent party might do.

- Ask the third party to help you see how you might be contributing to the conflict. What do they see about that you might not be able to see?

If you find yourself frequently playing the role of the victim in life's narrative, you might want to ask yourself why that is:

- Do you have a pattern of picking friends who will take sides with you or who will do things you don't want to do for yourself?
- Do you frequently find yourself feeling as if you lack power or choice (e.g., *"It doesn't matter what I say or do, they are going to do what they want"* or *"I didn't have a choice"* or *"What was I supposed to do?"*)?
- Were there messages you received while growing up that suggested you couldn't do things on your own and needed outside help?

When You Are the Rescuer

Humans naturally turn to others in times of need—at home, in the workplace, at church, or in the pub. Basic kindness means that we try to help each other out, with a particular eye toward those who might be disadvantaged or treated unfairly. It becomes problematic when you are asked to take sides in a person's struggle, especially if it is a repeated request or if you are asked to use your power to influence the outcome in one direction or another.

As one who is being asked—explicitly or implicitly—to function in the role of a rescuer, the temptation is to get directly involved in the conflict oneself. Be careful not to confront on behalf of another. No matter how sympathetic you are to his story, don't make the victim's problem your own. Likewise, avoid setting yourself up as the arbitrator who goes to listen also to the other side's point of view so that you can make up your mind about who's right and who's wrong and how it should get worked out.

The spiritual challenge for the rescuer is to rouse the courage necessary to set boundaries, opting for one of two equally worthy possibilities. One is to abdicate your role in the triangle by letting the person know you are uncomfortable in the role and/or encouraging the person to speak directly with the absent party (e.g., *"I love being friends with both of you and don't want to find myself in the middle"* or *"Have you talked to him directly? Seems like this would be a really important thing to let him know."*)

The other option, if you feel up for it, is to play the role of coach, helping the victim get to the point where he or she can directly engage the one who has done the harm (or is at least perceived to have done so). Coaching, as distinguished from rescuing, is characterized by adhering to these guidelines:

- It's fine to name feelings you hear the other person expressing (e.g., *"I can hear you are really angry/upset/*

hurt”) but don’t take sides or express an opinion about the situation itself.

- Don’t say anything about the absent party that you aren’t willing for that party to hear you say. The victim will be tempted to repeat anything you say that bolsters their case (e.g., “Well, *Juan says what you did was unconscionable*”).
- Keep the focus on what the victim might do to help repair the relationship, not what you or the absent party might do.
- Freely acknowledge that the victim can take your suggestions or not. After discussing all the options, they decide what they want to do next.

If you are someone in a leadership role to whom both persons report (or the parent of two squabbling children), you might by virtue of your role need to get involved in the conflict. As a general principle, however, consistently convey that you won’t get involved until they’ve first tried to talk about it themselves. If someone feels unsafe in doing so, you can even offer to sit with her as she brings it up, but you won’t be sharing her story for her.

If you find yourself frequently being called upon to play the role of rescuer in life’s dramas, it is again good to ask why:

- Do you have a pattern of choosing companions with many needs? What does it mean to you that others come to you so often?
- Is your desire to help others getting in the way of them learning to help themselves?
- Is the role of fixer one that you have played since childhood? Who modeled it for you?

When You Are the Villain

Wow—no one likes to find out that he is starring as the villain in someone’s story, and yet all of us at one point in time or another find our name on the playbill in forty-eight-point font. You aren’t on the stage yet, but knowing that you are about to be can be quite anxiety-producing in itself.

Upon receiving news of others’ discontent through a third party, the spiritual challenge of the villain is to invite direct conversation and *only* direct conversation:

- Express your desire that the victim come talk with you directly (e.g., “It sounds like she is upset. I hope she will come see me directly about that”).
- Do not consent to using the third party as a go-between by asking her to return a message back to the victim.
- Do not say anything about the victim or share your version of the conflict with the third party. If you

need to find a coach, find your own coach (not rescuer) who is disconnected to the situation.

- If you have been avoiding a conversation with the victim, initiate direct communication.

One of the most courageous villains I have ever met was the new pastor of a parish who was having difficulty with the longtime parish council. At council meetings, the pastor and council members would placidly discuss agenda topics with the members showing great deference to the pastor, but then after the meeting the pastor would look out the window as the council members walked to their cars and stood in the parking lot speaking in small groups for another hour. The next time the council was scheduled to meet, the pastor moved the table and chairs out of the rectory and into the middle of the parking lot, saying that he thought "it would be better to gather out here, since this is where the real meeting is." To this day, the event is recounted with much laughter, but it marked a definite shift in the usual patterns of communication within the parish.

I have yet to meet anyone who self-identifies as a villain in his or her own plot, but if it is a role that you find yourself cast in over and over again by others, it is something worth paying attention to. Consider these questions:

- Is there feedback people have tried to give you that you aren't paying attention to? Are there other

reasons people may have difficulty approaching you?

- To whom can you turn for honest feedback about your own blind spots? Is there someone who could help you see the role you are playing in the tension?

The Problem That Isn't

One of the most frequently asked questions I receive when working with church groups about conflict has to do with power differential. We are willing to admit the desirability, indeed advantages, of speaking to one another directly about our tensions . . . until we begin to talk about our pastors, our bosses, or our bishops. Then the anxiety about having direct conversation skyrockets anew because the imagined costs become so high: We may lose our job, our faculties, our program—geez, who knows?—our hope of eternal salvation. We consider authority an exception to the rule and boomerang back to the notion that triangulating is the way to go. This perception is so pervasive and there is enough to say about the topic that it merits more extensive exploration in chapter 6, but for now, suffice it to say that none of us is off the hook when it comes to accountability for how we handle ourselves in conflict, even if the villain in our scenario is the pope.

The Problem That Is

The other most frequently asked question has to do with abuse: Do you still recommend direct conversation if the victim has been treated with violence or cruelty by the other, or even if he or she *fears* the other might become violent or cruel? The answer is *no*. But if you are the third party called upon in such a scenario, neither do you want to embrace the role of rescuer and confront the absent party yourself. Scenarios such as domestic violence, sexual assault, or child abuse need to be referred to trained counselors and legal authorities. We need to recognize where our own abilities to coach someone have reached their limits. In such cases the best thing we can do is to help the person find someone who knows what next steps need to be taken.

Even in cases where there is not a pattern of abuse, it might still make sense to get outside help. There are conflicts that are so entrenched, with such long histories or in such a state of impasse, that the victim is likely never going to feel ready to go into the conversation on his own without some additional support. Mediators are neutral third parties who are in no way connected to the conflict at hand and can create a safe, confidential space for all parties involved to express themselves and problem solve.

Most of the conflicts we will encounter, however, will not be of this more severe nature. Most will be the everyday mishmash of forgotten soccer practice

pickups, work schedules double booked, budget mishaps, and botched dinner plans. They will be provoked by decisions on which we were not consulted, random changes to which no one alerted us, and professors who make strangely quirky comments in class. And, as ordinary as these conflicts are, they are the places where we have the opportunity to offer profound Christian witness in the way we choose to handle them.

Once upon a time, my dean let me know it was time to start dealing with these conflicts directly—with charity and curiosity. And I did go (knees quaking) to knock on my professor's door. He answered and we talked. I don't really remember the content of that conversation anymore; indeed, I don't really remember the nature of the original argument. But I remember that I tried something new that day. I became just a little bit braver. And that has made all the difference in the world.

Companion for the Journey: **Leo the Great**

It is one of the great mysteries of Christian history: what exactly happened between Pope Leo and the infamous Hun general Attila in the summer of AD 452?

Attila had had his sights set on Rome for some time. The self-titled *Flagellum Dei* ("Scourge of God") had spent the previous two years attacking city after city in what would now be France and northern Italy,

plundering monasteries and churches, razing towns, raping women, and killing peasants and bishops alike. His empire at that time already stretched outward from the Hun capital (near modern-day Budapest) as far east as Kazakhstan, as far north as Lithuania, and as far west as Germany, but his appetite for land and power still remained. Rome, capital of the ailing western Roman Empire, seemed ripe for the picking.

To make matters worse, Honoria—the elder sister of the western Roman emperor, Valentinian III—sent Attila a letter. Upset with the choice of husband her brother proposed for her, she decided to mail Attila her engagement ring and a plea for help. (Talk about triangulation!) Attila read the gesture as an invitation to marriage and demanded from Valentinian half of the western empire's territory as a dowry. The letter appeared to give Attila a legitimate excuse to attack.

At his wits' end, Valentinian asked Leo, the bishop of Rome, to travel with two other government officials—Avienus and Trygetius—to beg for peace. One *could* say that Leo was a third party, asked to get involved in what rightfully should have been Valentinian's task to address. But, by this point in history, the Roman government was very weak and the Church had assumed a greater and greater role in meeting the everyday needs of the Roman population. In many ways, Leo *was* the functioning leader of the city and his concern for his flock is well documented.

The mission appeared to have little chance of success. Other envoys, including bishops trying to save their cities, had been killed by Attila in the recent past. And what motive would Attila have to change his mind? He was backed up by an army estimated at around a half-million men.

Nevertheless, the trio led by Leo mustered up all their courage and headed north to speak with Attila directly. They met with him in his tent along the banks of the River Mincio, about halfway between modern-day Milan and Venice. No one knows what was said, but immediately afterward, Attila abandoned his battle plans and withdrew. Rome was spared.

Some have suggested that Leo offered Attila a large sum of money. Some have thought Attila's sizeable army was running short on food and plagued by malaria and ready to go home. Ancient legend, transformed into art by the Renaissance painter Raphael, says that when Leo met with Attila, Saints Peter and Paul hovered with bare swords behind him. But others have said it was merely the inner strength of Leo himself that Attila found so persuasive. The earliest known commentator on the event, Prosper of Aquitaine, writes, "For when the king had received the embassy, he was so impressed by the presence of the high priest that he ordered his army to give up warfare and, after he had promised peace, he departed beyond the Danube."⁴

Perhaps *what* exactly Leo said is much less important than that he was there. He had the courage to go directly to speak with one whom millions rightfully feared and believed that talking could make a difference. Indeed, he bet his life on it.

For Reflection and Prayer

1. What types of conflicts in your life do you find most difficult to address directly? Why?
2. Who most frequently appears as the villain in the story you tell of your life right now? When you think about talking to this person directly about the challenges of the relationship, what do you fear? What would help you feel more confident going into the conversation?
3. Can you think of a time when you were part of a triangle created by someone else? If you were to find yourself part of this triangle again, what could you do to set clearer boundaries and step out of the role into which you were cast?
4. What is one insight you would want to take from the life of Leo the Great regarding overcoming fears of direct communication?

Across all of history, O Lord,
your angels and prophets have greeted the
quivering
with one consistent message: "Do not be afraid."
As I quiver now before the prospect of entering
into a challenging conversation,
I need you to whisper those words again in my
ear.
Give me the resolve to break out of the endless
cycle of talking "about" this person
and the courage to start talking directly to him
(her).
Lift my chin and steady my knocking knees
as I walk toward my own meeting "on the banks of
the River Mincio"
knowing that you are with me every step of the
way.
Amen.