

## **"Do not be anxious about your life...." (Matt 6:25)**

A priest-friend visited me a while ago, and we spoke about parish life. Our conversation focused on the importance of a pastor communicating a "non-anxious presence" within the parish community, and in particular, the work of the late Edwin Friedman, who was an ordained Jewish rabbi, author, and family therapist. Friedman coined the term "non-anxious presence," and he was a proponent of the "family-systems model" in pastoral ministry.

The family-systems model explores the dynamics of the entire family unit, instead of focusing solely on the person in crisis. Friedman's theory can be applied to families, parish councils, and parish communities. His classic book, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, is a "must read" for those going into ministry.

Friedman also believed that pastors become more effective when dealing with crises when they differentiate themselves from the emotion swirling around them. Conversely, if pastors enmesh themselves within an anxiety-filled system— whether that system is their own family unit, another family unit, or a parish community—their effectiveness in resolving crises diminishes. Likewise, if pastors concentrate on quickly "fixing" crises rather than stepping back to observe and properly analyze the dynamics of crises, they are unlikely to encourage a thoughtful and peaceful resolution; they will only add to the unbalanced and fruitless emotional dynamics fueling the problem.

"Self-differentiation," as Friedman defines it, entails internal process (knowing what one believes) and external process (defining oneself to others). It combines "intimacy with autonomy"; requiring "close contact, yet independence". He states:

The capacity of members of the clergy to contain their own anxiety regarding congregational matters, both those not related to them, as well as those where they become the identified focus, may be the most significant capability in their arsenal. Not only can such capacity enable religious leaders to be more clear-headed about solutions and more adroit in triangles but, because of the system effect that a leader's functioning always has on an entire organism, a non-anxious presence will modify anxiety throughout the entire congregation.

Being a non-anxious presence is easier said than done. Most clergy relish being "doers" and "fixers." Like Lazarus' sister, Martha of the Gospel, they are "anxious about many things." Parishioners add to that anxiety: they evaluate their pastor's ability to "fix" everyone's problems and "carry" everyone's emotions. Thus, learning how to be a non-anxious presence in parish life takes training, experience, and skill. Friedman himself admits that pastors never fully attain this capacity.

However, the Christian Gospel demands even more than Friedman's thoughtful observations about anxiety and its debilitating effects on a congregation. As Christians, we are commanded to trust God in the manner of our Lord Jesus Christ; suffering to the point of His relinquishment of care and worry: "Into thy hands, I commit my spirit."

Students at seminary count anxiety as a familiar companion. First-year students are anxious about leaving comfortable surroundings for new spaces; their finances and grades; and fitting in with professors and classmates. Second-year students are anxious about ministering to the sick, elderly, and dying, within their hospital visitation program. Third-year students are concerned with post-graduation: whether or not a parish will be open to them; how they will function in church life. Anxiety casts a long shadow.

But Jesus instructs us not to be anxious about our life. He instructs us not to engage worries that rule us and strip us of our joy. Jesus does not forbid prudent foresight; nor does He encourage us to be shiftless or reckless. Rather he warns against an anxious orientation, as did His disciples after Him.

The Apostle Paul teaches, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil. 4:6). The Apostle Peter writes, "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" (1 Pt. 5:7). In these words, we sense liberation from an anxious orientation while bringing our legitimate cares before God.

Uncertainty need not cause anxiety. Belief in God's care—His knowing our real needs—gives us security and the peace that passes all understanding. The key to maintaining a non-anxious presence lies in strengthening our belief in God's providence: He sees the bigger picture that escapes us. We can maintain a non-anxious presence, only because He does! Can anyone imagine an "anxious" God?

It would be a stretch to think that Edwin Friedman had any knowledge of St. Seraphim of Sarov. But the internal process of knowing what ones believes and the external process of expressing that to others (which Friedman taught) mimics St. Seraphim's famous spiritual axiom: "Acquire peace (the Holy Spirit) and a thousand around you will be saved."

We cannot effect change in any family system by trying to change others. We can change only ourselves, the first step in dismantling an "anxious system." A secure belief in God's providence—our life in His hands—will profoundly affect our pastoral ministry.

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