

"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." (Psalm 127:1)

The picture isn't pretty. The percentage of clergy who experience burn out, depression, or malaise, is deeply concerning. It is clear that when the priest spirals down, his parish suffers in its own way. Burnout affects everyone in its environment.

Much has been written about the stress levels that the clergy experience. The demands on time, energy, and the expectation placed on them are halting. Clergy are responsible to their parishioners in a variety of ways: as preachers, leaders, administrators, confessors, teachers, counselors, and even fundraisers. Some clergy let years go by without a vacation. The effects of a 24/7 schedule, the lack of supervision, the experience of isolation, and the common phenomenon of being placed on a pedestal eventually take their toll.

Research notes that clergy are usually the first persons contacted during a family, marital, or personal crisis, because of their accessibility and the high level of trust people place in them. Not surprisingly, research also points to a direct link between the stresses of ministry and the demons that many clergy secretly fight: marital issues, obesity, and sexual addictions. I recommend an article entitled "Mental Health Issues Among Clergy and Other Religious Professionals: A Review of Research," written collaboratively by five researchers and published by the *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Winter 2002, Vol. 56, No. 4, p. 393–403, which provides a eye-opening overview of clergy health.

Recommendations on how to ensure clergy health abound. Solutions range from easy fixes like a "priest's day off" and physical exercise, to more far-reaching solutions, which include pastoral supervision, better screening methods for potential candidates to the priesthood, and encouragement of seminary students to enroll in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). (The reason to encourage CPE enrollment is simple: those who experience this training are more likely to seek out counseling for themselves in times of difficulties.) Interestingly, Lilly Endowment, Inc. a philanthropic foundation that seeks to strengthen religious congregations, recognized the link between healthy pastors and healthy church communities. It initiated a program for clergy renewal a few years ago called "National Clergy Renewal Program," which provides funding to clergy and their parishes, to allow the priest or minister to take a year's Sabbatical, in order to pursue a project that would enrich his or her ministry.

All these recommendations have great merit and should be employed and supported, but it seems to me that the "one thing needful" seems to be a footnote in the literature on this subject. Upon reflection, I am reminded of the Apostle Paul's ministry and his particular "sufferings" for Christ as he outlined them in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11. So, I have to ask: What sustained Paul in the midst of those sufferings? How was he able to carry the burdens of his ministry? What made it possible for him to rejoice in all things? The answer is clear. What sustained and strengthened him was his relationship with the Lord Jesus. And, just as clear, the solution to burn out, stress, and emotional turmoil can be no different for us who desire to serve the Lord, if we want to avoid becoming a statistic.

Spiritual formation includes a particular emphasis on a living, dynamic, and daily walk with the Lord. Our seminary emphasizes this formation in numerous ways—through the daily cycle of services, regular confession, daily reading of Scripture, and the daily rule of prayer. But

particularly, formation takes place when we enter the "closet of the heart" and there learn how to be alone with Him. Prayer with our spouses and children is always important, but it cannot be a substitute for a personal encounter and intimacy with God. Such spiritual intimacy requires great effort and courage. It does not take place overnight. It will not be productive if we are seeking instant gratification. But if cultivated with "sweat and blood," it will become to us like a Jacob's Well, the Pool of Siloam, and the Jordan River.

In cultivating first and foremost the right relationship between the Lord and ourselves, we begin to understand that our efforts, talents, abilities, skills, techniques, or (God-forbid) charm do not grow or deepen a parish as the Body of Christ. Instead, such spiritual intimacy will continually remind us of Christ's words: "Without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Separated from Him, we succumb to the greatest temptation in ministry: to go it alone by exerting individual effort. If we follow this path, it will not take long before we crash into the proverbial "wall." Only the right relationship between the Lord and us will produce good and lasting fruit, as we daily minister in His strength, directed by His will. Will we learn this lesson before we leave here and enter into an extraordinarily busy and challenging ministry? Perhaps we can, if we avail ourselves to the formation process here at St. Vladimir's.

If the daily cycle of services in our chapel seems like just one more thing on your plate, I pray that in being faithful to it, you will discover it to be your oasis, your teacher, and your nourishment. If your daily rule of prayer has become a meaningless exercise and you are apt to let it go, I pray that in being faithful to it, the Lord will find you. If the daily reading of Scripture has become simply an academic exercise, a way to prepare for a sermon, or a weapon to use against your enemies, I pray that in being faithful to the daily readings you will see that through them God is speaking to you. If silence frightens or bores you, I pray that you respond with tenacity, taking even five minutes (or to begin, four, three, two or one!) daily, to enter into that "secret place" with your heavenly Father.

The Lord stands at each of these "doors" and knocks. If we open them, a life-long journey of grace will unfold for us, a grace with a "sufficiency." May we have the courage and strength to open them. If we do, ministry will become our offering to God, and a replenishment of God's grace to us, which will not diminish, exhaust, or extinguish our souls.

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