

**"Through ministry, our life is changed."**

Alex was a severe diabetic. A widower for many years, he lived alone in a broken down home on top of a mountain where once he managed his large dairy farm. I was humbled whenever I visited him. His home needed a woman's touch, and some caulking around his windows and doors could have kept the cold from penetrating his living room and bedroom.

A small table stood beside the rocking chair in his living room where he kept a prayer book and a Bible. Both were terribly soiled and torn from use. I was ashamed each time I saw them because my prayer book and Bible looked practically new in comparison. On a number of occasions, I offered to provide him with a new prayer book and a new Bible, but Alex always refused. I was glad he did, because those items helped to remind me of my own weak prayer life.

Because of his diabetes, Alex underwent multiple amputations—a finger, a toe, a thumb. Once, before an operation to amputate his left leg from the knee down, I visited him in his hospital room. His face was grimacing in pain but he had enough humor to state, "Father, I guess I am going to heaven piece by piece." Oddly, the Orthodox funeral director in town, with Alex's blessing, had arranged with the hospital to preserve Alex's "parts" so that when he died, he was buried "whole."

Although I had graduated from St. Vladimir's Seminary at the top of my class, Alex taught me things to which my seminary classes could only point — humility, long-suffering, steadfastness, and a Job-like faith. Although he didn't know it, Alex was ministering to me, while I was trying to minister to him. I am eternally grateful to him.

This was not an extraordinary or unique occurrence in my parish experience; space prohibits me from recounting many more. It happened often and is still happening.

I was a young teenager when I first encountered the phenomenon of a parishioner ministering to a pastor. An influential pastor had allowed me to accompany him on a visit to an elderly parishioner. As we were about to arrive at her home, he stated rather matter-of-factly, "this woman taught me to pray." At that time, I couldn't believe my ears. Too afraid and embarrassed to respond openly, I questioned his words silently, "You are the priest, shouldn't you teach her how to pray?" Now, I understand perfectly what my pastor was saying. God puts people in our lives who teach us spiritual lessons. We need to be humble enough to acknowledge and accept them.

So many of us graduate from seminary with great dreams, aspirations, and zeal. We leave thinking that we can change the world. We can't wait to unload all the "information" that we have accumulated over our seminary career and to make things right in the parish.

What often happens, however, is surprising and humbling. Although we may minister effectively, ultimately we realize that God uses people in our ministry to change us. We learn quickly and unexpectedly that we have no "monopoly" on methods to the perfect spiritual life. We need to avoid the false notion that we are spiritually superior to those to whom we minister.

A story from the desert fathers underlines this vital lesson:

*One day Abba Arsenius consulted an old Egyptian monk about his own thoughts. Someone noticed this and said to him, "Abba Arsenius, how is it that you with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts?" He replied, "I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not know even the alphabet of this peasant."*

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