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A Pastor's Wellness

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At a convention on training for the priesthood, Pope Francis observed that young men who are psychologically unstable without knowing it often seek strong structures to support them, such as the police or the army, but for some it is the clergy: "When I realize that a young man is too rigid, too fundamentalist, I do not have confidence [about him]; in the background there is something that he himself does not know. . . . [Keep your] eyes open to the mission in seminaries."[1]

For the past twenty-five years, as director of the Clergy Consultation and Treatment Service at St. Vincent's Hospital in Westchester, New York, I've had the honor of working with hundreds of priests who have welcomed me into their interior lives. My goal in this chapter is to share with you some of that knowledge and experience in the hope you may avoid in your priesthood the kind of problems I've observed in others. It's also my fervent hope you will learn the skills of awareness, healthy coping, and self-care that can lead to a happy and fulfilling life as a pastor.

Because the priesthood is more a way of life than just a job, it's useful to our discussion to pose this question at the outset: *Whose priesthood is it?* You need to be clear on this. You're not doing it for mom, dad, or someone else. You're not doing it for the external reward of prestige, or because you need a ready-made role/identity. And you're not doing it to work out internal conflicts, which are best solved through the adoption of a code of conduct.

We start with this question because you cannot build a solid internal structure on external needs. To be sure, your priesthood will collapse without a strong internal foundation. For that reason, there can be only one answer to the question, Whose priesthood is it? *It has to be yours*.

Separating from the Laity

One approach to the theory of role identity sees a strong distinction between priests and laypeople. It holds that some people enter the priesthood to adopt a ready-made identity, to overcome a core of shame, and may use ordination as a way to bolster self-esteem and set themselves apart from others. In this version, negative qualities that could be associated with the laity (lust, substance abuse, depression, neediness, and being victimized as a child) are minimized by adoption of the in-group identity of clergy. The danger here is a failure to recognize the real self, as in "I am not one of them—I am a priest." Equally troublesome is its corollary, "I do not really need to be concerned with *me*. That is selfish. I care for others."

What this disconnection ignores is the fact that you are a human being entrusted with the care of yourself. You have the same human needs, the same temptations and risks as the laity. To attempt to compensate for this by adopting an identity is not to deal with one's issues—it's to bury, camouflage, and deny them. It's to deny internal awareness. Also implicit in this approach is an effort to diminish the laity and elevate oneself, which runs counter to what the church teaches in the *Program of Priestly Formation*. It holds, "A man of communion [is] a person who has real and deep relational capacities, someone who can enter into genuine dialogue and friendship, a person of true empathy who can understand and know other persons."[2] How does one accomplish this by setting oneself apart?

Caring for yourself is essential. Having self-knowledge and accepting your humanity is essential. The skill of intimacy is to share with others, not to set oneself apart. It's been my observation that newly ordained priests often fail to grasp this imperative, partly out of a desire to not make the same mistakes they've observed priests making in the past, especially in light of the sexual abuse scandals. They seem to believe that maintaining a distance from the laity is a prudent observance of boundaries that were lacking in the past. This is a well-intentioned but

mistaken posture. You can't lead if you're distant. Who will follow? Being a priest or pastor means to engage in *intimate* communication: listening, identifying with, resonating (using your own emotional experience), clarifying (what do they mean?), formulating (using your knowledge and intellect), responding, and then leading.

Drawing again on the *Program of Priestly Formation*, "A person of affective maturity [is] someone whose life of feelings is in balance and integrated into thought and values; in other words, *a man of feelings who is not driven by them but freely lives his life enriched by them*" (emphasis added). For true intimate communication to occur, we need to allow ourselves to resonate, to *feel* what the other person is saying. This requires that we have access to our own wellspring of emotions. Over the years, I have found the most common problem among troubled clergy is poor emotional awareness. And that, in turn, allows insidious processes to get us into trouble. If we don't acknowledge feelings of loneliness, for example, how can we deal with them in a way that proves beneficial?

The Problem with "People Pleasing"

In contrast to differentiating themselves from the laity, some pastors have difficulty saying *no*. Unfortunately, these so-called "people pleasers" become so time-constrained they neglect their families, friends, hobbies (if they have any), even their spirituality. Social isolation is often the result. On the other hand, clergy who moderate their desire to please typically reserve time for their personal lives without feeling selfish or anxious about disappointing others.

What I've observed is that one's sense of being a "good" person may depend on acceptance by others—on whether one is meeting their needs as *they* judge it. Let me be clear here: If your self-worth depends on others liking you, you're in trouble. As previously mentioned, this means you're attempting to build your self-esteem on an external foundation, and when others don't get what they want, you feel distressed and worthless. Before long, you're developing problems with time management, funds management, and self-esteem.

One solution is learning to live and operate within a world of limits. Translation: instead of saying no to a parishioner, say, "I would love to be able to do that, but we don't have the time (or money or ability) right now." Time management is about saying to someone, "I have an

appointment and can't speak to you now, but let's plan to get together this Friday when I can give you the time you deserve."

Managing Confrontation

Difficulties with confrontation is a universal problem among clergy. When confrontation is routinely avoided, passive-aggressive behavior can often take its place. Communication between a pastor and his associate or support staff may devolve into note writing, interpersonal avoidance, and building of resentment among both parties. Without the ability to manage confrontation, you lose the ability to manage yourself, your staff and other relationships, and interpersonal conflicts. In short, you are unable to collaborate.

All of which begs the question, How are you going to work with others if you cannot resolve conflict? It's naïve to assume that disagreements and misunderstandings won't occur when working with others. Confrontation is essentially a discrepancy between two or more people. Perhaps a staff member didn't perform as expected. Why, then, is this so hard to manage? What do we fear when we think of confronting someone? We fear we will hurt the other person's feelings or have our own feelings hurt. We fear angering the other person, leading to conflict and the raising of voices. We fear the other person won't like us anymore (a consequence of the aforementioned "people pleasing").

To give a practical example, on several occasions I've come across pastors who have had issues with secretaries they inherited from previous pastors. In one case, not only was the employee not very skilled, but she looked for opportunities to undermine the pastor because of her attachment to his predecessor. And because she had been at her job a long time—in fact, she practically ran the parish—the new pastor feared that firing her would touch off something of a palace revolt. In another case, the parish secretary had poor skills but was such a nice person the new pastor could never bring himself to hurt the employee's feelings.

The upshot? Both secretaries kept their jobs, but with a price. Because the authority of the first pastor was constantly undermined, he became more and more resentful. The second pastor was forced to correct his secretary's mistakes, which meant typing things himself, preparing the church bulletin, and doing other small tasks because it was just easier that way. Given how strapped pastors are for time, you

can imagine how unhealthy and intolerable this situation became. Lack of conflict resolution came back to haunt both pastors.

How, then, do we confront people in a productive manner? There are some practical rules of the road. First of all, keep in mind the discrepancy is about the persons' actions, not about the persons. There is no need to apologize for anything you have said, or to be anguished you may have hurt their feelings. Instead, you should start by reminding them of your positive regard for them and their contribution to the parish. Next, calmly and clearly spell out the issue that divides you—what happened, what you thought was going to happen—working through the discrepancy in a logical way. Most important, discuss what your expectations are going forward. If they get upset, that is *their* issue, and you should not respond in kind. To do so would be to surrender control of your emotions to them. Instead, you have a responsibility to understand and clarify why they're upset.

You can start to see how skilled confrontation enables *friendship and collaboration.* It can actually be a relief to others—they now know where you stand and where they stand. When things are unclear, suspicion and anxiety ensue as negativity and fear fill the vacuum. Skillful confrontation is an opportunity for positive feelings and intimate communication.

Accepting Authority

Ask any chancery personnel director or bishop, and they'll tell you that priests who have difficulty with authority are a common problem. Typically, they have a chip on their shoulder or feel the need to constantly show who is "top dog." An aspect of this is "personalization"—the feeling that everything is a reflection on their worth and status. Another offshoot is to judge the behavior of others through a filter that sees conflict where none exists.

Let me assure you this is a lonely and angry place to be. A healthy priest is one who accepts the authority of others—within limits—to serve the good of the church and its people. The *Program of Priestly Formation* is again instructive here: "A person of affective maturity . . . [is] evidenced in his ability to live well with authority and in his ability to take direction from another, and to exercise authority well among his peers."

Keeping Social Isolation at Bay

Part of the difficulty of transitioning from the seminary to the "real world" is maintaining a social network. While that might have been easy in the seminary, it changes significantly in the parish, and is even more difficult when you become pastor. You are now in a position of power and living in a fishbowl. Spending time with one person or group, for example, can appear to be "playing favorites." There are new pressures and problems that daily demand your attention. As a result, socializing may seem like a waste of time and energy. Just closing your door, collapsing in your recliner, and having some time to yourself may seem far more desirable.

This is another "insidious" process (defined as one that causes harm in a way that is gradual and not easily noticed) lying in wait for pastors. Pretty soon people stop calling you because you are always busy—or maybe you stop returning their calls from the comfort of your recliner. If you find yourself on this treadmill, you have entered red-flag territory.

Needing friends is not a weakness. You are human, after all, and you need others to validate your existence. That's why your peers—other pastors and priests—are particularly important. They are supportive, caring, and help keep you in check. If you're having difficulty with an issue or an individual, you need to talk it over with others who understand the nuances and difficulties of your situation. Normally you can't do this with parishioners, for that would be to cede your role as their priest, serving instead as their friend. That is what *boundaries* are about.

Be aware that socializing with peers takes some planning. You already know this if you've tried calling priest friends at the last minute to see if they're available on your day off. They're probably not, which can lead to discouragement and social withdrawal. With a little advance planning, however, you can help ensure you're both free and able to enjoy a relaxing day away from the parish and all its attendant concerns.

Accepting Compliments

Does the following sound familiar? "I hear the one negative comment about my homily and dismiss the one hundred positive compliments—they're just being nice." Allowing in the positive is part of maintaining self-worth and avoiding false humility. Those who compliment you will

instinctively know if you are not receptive to them. Not allowing such compliments in can lead you to pursuing affirmation in other, inappropriate ways, such as flirting or seeking adulation from parishioners.

Learn how to accept compliments. This is not about pride, but support. As the *Program of Priestly Formation* puts it, "A man of communion . . . [is] open to others and available to them with a generosity of spirit. The man of communion is capable of making a gift of himself and of receiving the gift of others."

Accenting the Positive

Like people in any field, priests who dwell on the negative aspects of work, relationships with others, and the world around them generally are destined for a life of misery and stress. As part of your emotional awareness development, ask yourself, Am I looking at the negative side only? What are the positives? Then engage a peer or friend in the discussion. Research shows that dwelling on life's dark and gloomy corners contributes to poor adjustment and early burnout. Furthermore, negative emotions can have a pervasive influence on perceptions and behaviors, so that potentially valuable resources like social and organizational support are never fully appreciated or utilized.

By shifting gears from "learned helplessness" to "learned optimism," the psychologist Martin Seligman developed a program to accentuate the positive. One of his techniques is to think of three good things at the end of each day and write them down in a journal. This exercise should be done during a prearranged quiet period in which you're able to listen to God and to your own heart, and reflect on the events of the day. There will be some days, of course, where things didn't go well but through a better understanding of *why*, you can make adjustments to ensure the next day is better. Keeping this kind of journal also encourages gratitude and an inner optimism.

I've had priests say to me, "That sounds nice, but I really don't have the time for it." My response to them is, "You owe it to yourself to take the time. If you realize how important it can be to your well-being, you'll find a way to make it happen."

Adjusting to the Priesthood

I've found through my work with priests that those who adjust best to their jobs have an ability to disengage from their demanding roles as leaders. In other words, those who take time to tend to their needs as human beings fare the best. It is not selfish to minister to oneself.[3]

Other traits that can help prevent burnout are a sense of personal autonomy, strong social support, and organizational backing. That's why having a mentor is extremely important. It's your acknowledgment that you can't do it all, that you don't (nor should you) have all the answers, that you don't believe seeking guidance is a sign of weakness.

It's amazing to me that so many priests don't have a spiritual director. We all instinctively know that an internal orientation to spirituality is essential to vocational satisfaction. The danger of not having that focus is for you to turn away from and sacrifice the ingredient that is most vital to your vocation: spirituality. Finding the right spiritual director is not always easy; in fact, it's becoming increasingly difficult. But given the multitude of pressures and distractions that priests confront daily, it's a task you can't afford *not* to undertake.

The Protective Effect of Self-Compassion

A heavy dose of self-compassion can also help ease your journey through priesthood. As discussed by the authors Laura Barnard and John Curry, it can benefit you in three ways. First, by offering you kindness, patience, and understanding during times of failure, stress, or disappointment. Second, by recognizing that others find themselves in similar valleys and by having self-compassion they are able to feel connected rather than isolated. Third, by allowing you to hold your worries in *mindful awareness* without ruminating on them you are free to dwell on positive accomplishments, rather than be brought down by emotional exhaustion.[4]

Essential to developing self-compassion is spending fifteen to twenty minutes in both the morning and the evening on contemplation (the evening portion could be your journaling exercise, previously discussed). These should be quiet periods in which you listen to God and to your own heart, and reflect on events of the most recent day, and the day that lies ahead.

The Importance of Physical Health

It's not uncommon for priests to eschew physical exercise on the following grounds: "Why should I selfishly spend time working out or caring for my own health? That's not serving the people." The answer, of course, is that if you want to have a long and successful priesthood, you need to take care of your physical self. Scientific literature is replete with studies that demonstrate the stress-reducing and resilience-enhancing effects of exercise. To be in shape not only increases stamina but elevates mood. I know of a number of pastors who have undertaken exercise regimens and reaped tremendous benefits. These include extra stores of energy, motivation, and enthusiasm that bring them "faithfully" to the gym at five in the morning for their daily workouts.

Fighting Addiction through Active Coping

One way to think of addiction is as a compulsion designed to distract us from unpleasant and often painful perceptions of ourselves. It can encompass alcohol abuse, pornography, sex, gambling, overeating, and masturbation. Almost any activity can be done in a compulsive way (without awareness or conscious control) to achieve the goal of emotional denial.

To break the cycle of addiction, we need to adopt an *active* coping style and be able to access our interior lives. That means fighting social isolation and accepting the help of others. It means taking a spiritual "inventory" and discovering how and why we've become disconnected from our spiritual selves. We then need to apply and practice the skills that we've discussed—exercising self-compassion, accenting the positive in your life, accepting support from a mentor/ spiritual director/social network, knowing how to disengage from your pastoral role, taking time for your physical needs—to get back on the right path.

You Owe It to Yourself

As you evolve in your spiritual role as pastor, it's important to recognize the need to grow in other ways as well. There are things you can—

and must—do to promote and ensure your wellness. As the *Program of Priestly Formation* points out, social interaction and skills should not be viewed as peripheral to what you do, but as integral to your vocation. By paying attention to and practicing self-care, you can lessen the likelihood of problems and pressures overwhelming you.

An active coping strategy embraces a host of things you can do for yourself to maintain a healthy mind and body. I suggest keeping a "Wellness Checklist," similar to the one that follows, to keep you focused in social, spiritual, pastoral, emotional, and physical realms.

Monthly Wellness Checklist

SOCIAL

1. ☐ I called a peer and made a social appointment for some time in the next two weeks.
2. ☐ I called a family member and caught up with the goings on in our family.
3. ☐ I spoke with a friend about my week. I listened to the positive and negative things my friend has been through as well.
4. ☐ I have been mindful of my boundaries with staff and parishioners.
5. ☐ I have been mindful of my feelings and fantasies.
6. ☐ I did not view inappropriate material on my computer this month.

SPIRITUAL

7. ☐ I celebrated Mass and prayed the Office.
8. ☐ I did some spiritual reading.
9. ☐ I prayed the rosary.
10. ☐ I have scheduled a meeting with my spiritual director/confessor within the next month or so.
11. ☐ I prepared for an upcoming day of recollection or annual retreat.
12. ☐ I spent some time before the Blessed Sacrament devoting myself to some one-on-one time with the Lord.

PASTORAL

13. ☐ I have tried to be mindful of my motivations for ministry—it is not in the service of being liked, admired, or adored.

14. ☐ I have been able to be compassionate and understanding with parishioners and staff, modeling kindness whenever I could.
15. ☐ I made a pastoral visit to a parishioner at home or in the hospital.
16. ☐ With compassion and nurturance, I was able to confront someone who needed it.
17. ☐ I maintained an attitude of collaboration with my staff.

EMOTIONAL

18. ☐ I maintained self-compassion.
19. ☐ I looked for, and let go of, resentment.
20. ☐ My mood has been positive; I feel hopeful about the future.
21. ☐ I have felt gratitude for friends and family.
22. ☐ I have been aware of my feelings and did not distract myself from them with work or avoidance.
23. ☐ I did not feel lonely; or, if I did, I tried reaching out to others.
24. ☐ I planned and protected my day off and spent it outside the rectory.
25. ☐ I have spent some good "alone" time, allowing myself to decompress and relax.
26. ☐ I have nurtured myself with some activity I enjoy, such as reading a book, watching a movie, focusing on a hobby, etc.

PHYSICAL

27. ☐ I have had a medical checkup within the last year and I am caring for my health by taking my medications and following my doctor's advice.
28. ☐ I did not abuse nicotine, alcohol, food, or other drugs.
29. ☐ I have done 20–30 minutes of daily exercise.
30. ☐ I watched my diet, and have been mindful of my weight.

Essentially, a pastor's wellness is a carefully balanced system, each facet feeding the others. That's why it's not a bad idea to sit down at the end of each day and take stock of what happened. It should be a quiet period in which you may listen to God and to your own heart and reflect on the events of the day.

I also suggest writing down three things that went well, and why. There will be some days that don't go well, of course. We've all had them, and there's nothing wrong with acknowledging it. But through a better understanding of why they occurred, we can take steps to ensure that the next day is sunnier, that we're better able to deal with the drumbeat of issues and the people around us from a position of confidence and strength.

In conclusion, a point that bears repeating, as I have found it to be so beneficial in the health and wellness of priests, is that you owe it to yourself to take the time to do these things. If you realize how critical it is to your well-being, you'll find a way to make it happen.

Endnotes

1. "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Convention Sponsored by the Congregation for the Clergy on the 50th Anniversary of the Conciliar Decrees *Optatam Totius* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis*," November 20, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151120_formazione-sacerdoti.html.

2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), 76.

3. D. K. Pooler, "Pastors and Congregations at Risk: Insights from Role Identity Theory," *Pastoral Psychology* 60 (October 2011).

4. Laura Barnard and John Curry, "The Relationship of Clergy Burnout to Self-Compassion and Other Personality Dimensions," *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 2 (April 2012).