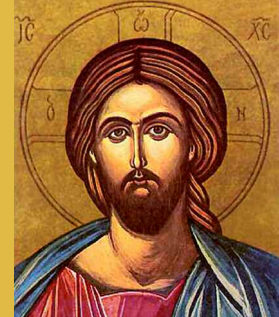


the *Presbyter*



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Pastors, Problems and Parish Life

Growing up as a hyphenated person in a Greek-American parish in the Mid-west, from an early age I was taught a very peculiar mythology about family life: Greek Orthodox families didn't have the "problems" that plagued other, merely American, families - like alcoholism, infidelity, divorce, drug abuse and much else that my elders confidently pointed to in the families of our "American" neighbors or co-workers.

Fast forward 20 years later to my first parish assignment as a newly ordained priest: within only a couple of months of my arrival I received a call late one night from a middle-aged Greek American man whose life was falling to pieces: he couldn't hold down a job, his second wife was leaving him and he was terribly depressed and felt suicidal. The problem: drug addiction. His parents, active and often disruptive members in the parish, refused to acknowledge that their son had a serious problem with addiction. As I later discovered, the reason they refused to acknowledge their son's addiction was that they were themselves alcoholics.

But we're not supposed to have these kinds of problems - wasn't that what I had learned growing up?

A couple of years ago, I was asked to speak with Holy Cross seminarians in one of their classes on pastoral theology: what were some of the pastoral issues they could expect to face in a parish setting? So, I discussed some of the things I had experienced through the years: embezzlement of parish funds by a prominent layman in the parish; parish council members having affairs and leaving their wives, leading to the question of whether they can continue to serve on the parish council or not (the answer is no); incest between a father and daughter; sexual molestation by an older

child of a much younger child in the parish; and much else. As I watched the eyes of the students get bigger and bigger, I realized that I needed to stop and give them time to process the stories I had just told them. They seemed as surprised as I had been more than two decades before.

Once, while talking about a variety of pastoral problems with a clinical psychologist and university professor, I was told that - statistically speaking - the "typical" parish of 100 adult males and 100 adult females is likely at any given time to have members with these psychological disorders: 4 members with bipolar disorder; 5 - 9 members suffering from serious depression, several with clinical depression; 1 member who is schizophrenic; 4 members with obsessive compulsive disorder; 3 women suffering from either anorexia or bulimia; 10 members with serious alcohol or other drug dependencies; as well as a relatively indeterminate number of people suffering from personality disorders ranging from narcissistic to anti-social types. And, of course, this doesn't even include what we clergy bring to the mix.

It is clear that we as pastors must have a basic understanding of human psychology. Yes, we must understand the passions such as arrogance, greed, lust, anger and acedia and the appropriate therapies for these diseases of the soul as laid out by the great ascetic teachers and saints of our Church. And we must first deal with these passions in ourselves before thinking we can deal with them in others. This point is made especially clear in the writings of both St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Gregory the Great and is something we ignore at great peril to the people we serve. But I have also come to believe that we can benefit as pastors from some of the insights of modern psychology, as well. Psychology is, after all, a Greek word, our word, and means "the study of the soul." And in the practice of being a pastor I have often found that until some basic psychological issues are resolved - sometimes even with medication - no spiritual progress can be made. In serving the people of our parishes we must bring every possible tool to the table.

As we enter this season of Lent and begin our preparation for the celebration of the Lord's Crucifixion and Resurrection, let us constantly pray to the only true Physician of our souls and bodies that he will make us worthy instruments of His healing.

—Rev. Steven P. Tsihchlis - President, APC
Pastor, St. Paul's Church - Irvine, CA



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Depression and Anxiety: Pastoral Responses

An Interview with Father Tom Tsagalakis

Interviewer: Stories about people with depression seem to pop up everywhere today: in the print media, on the web, on morning T.V. shows, in HMO newsletters. Give us a working definition of depression, and tell us how it is different from just having the blues once in a while.

Father Tom: Life is filled with many challenges and opportunities that create normal emotional ups and downs, sometimes referred to as “having the blues.” But when a person finds herself stuck in the “down” times for a long duration, she may be in the grip of depression. Sometimes considered the common cold of mental health, the severity of depression varies from one person to the next. Depression usually affects a person’s well-being, and results in three or more of the following symptoms, which occur nearly every day: chronic fatigue with little energy, as well as sleep and eating problems (either too much or too little). Depression may affect your mood, with feelings of sadness, unhappiness, emptiness, and hopelessness. Depression forces you to second-guess yourself, so you become negative and self-critical. You may feel uneasy as you become isolated, irritable, and angry. Concentration, memory, and decision making also become more difficult.

The working definition that my clients have taught me likens depression to an alien, negative force that tricks us into forgetting that God loves us and that we are His beloved. It deceives us into dismissing the truth that we are created in God’s image, that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, that within us we have the most powerful life force. I try to help people remember that they are not the problem! The problem is the problem.

Depression helps focus our conversations, energy, thoughts, and life on deficits. It emphasizes what isn’t working, what’s wrong, what’s negative, what needs to be fixed. Depression insidiously convinces us to shut up, to stuff ideas, thoughts, and feelings inside. We turn feelings of pain, fear, sadness, hurt, frustration, and anger inward. The inability to respond to these powerful emotions in caring and loving ways forces us to withdraw, creating a sense that we cannot speak freely of matters of the heart and soul. This withdrawal ultimately robs our energy.

Under this spell of depression, we forget our gifts and overlook the reality that we are created in God’s image. Imagine if we focused our questions, energy, and curiosity on how people have staged active protests and been victorious against depression! St. Dorotheos of Gaza says, “Know that if a person is attacked by some thought (depression, fear, anxiety) or is grieved by it and does not acknowledge it, she only strengthens it against herself, that is, she gives the thought itself more strength to attack and torment her. But if she acknowledges it (depression, fear, anxiety) and



begins to struggle (and becomes genuinely curious) and resist the thought and do what is opposed to it, the passion will weaken and will have no power to attack her and bring her sorrow. And later, little by little, striving and receiving help from God, she will overcome the passion itself.”

We have to respond to depression with the inner voice of the soul, boldly claiming the conviction that we are God’s beloved and are created to become fully alive in His love, peace, and suffering. Yes, even suffering can be endured with a grounded love. Thomas Merton, the Roman Catholic monk and writer, said something like, “I didn’t go to the monastery to suffer more, I went to the monastery to suffer more effectively.”

Interviewer: How prevalent is depression among women in this culture?

Father Tom: That's such a tricky question in my estimation, because the research clearly shows that women are impacted by depression twice as much as men. Women tend to do a better job seeking and asking for help, which may skew the statistics. We men generally try to handle things on our own. Unfortunately, we haven't totally outgrown this John Wayne syndrome, where we fight our battles alone, ride off into the sunset alone, and are proud of it!

God created us to be in community to support, love, help, and nurture each other during difficult times. Women who struggle with depression are often labeled as weak, moody, needy, lost, etc. But I believe there are just as many men out there slowly being sapped of energy, their bodies silently dying because they too have no place to speak of the inner parts of the heart silenced by feelings of rejection, inadequacy, low self-esteem, of not being respected or appreciated.

Judas lost the true reality that he always had been, and always would be, loved by God.

He couldn't find a way to stay open to the light of Christ.

Interviewer: The soul sicknesses of our modern times appear to be loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Were these illnesses among us in ages past, or are they rooted in the soul of this present age? Please explain.

Father Tom: Sometimes we think that today we have more violence, more mental illness, and less spirituality. The truth is that these demons have followed us throughout time: battles against the demons of depression, fear, anger, anxiety, and stress have been going on since Adam's fall. St. John of Kronstadt somewhere says something like, "We must have a clear eye of the soul able to watch and notice the entrance into the heart of thoughts sent by the Evil One (depression, fear, and anxiety), and to repel them." Those evil powers impact us today, just as they did in New Testament times.

I believe Judas suffered from severe depression, and felt ultimate hopelessness, isolation, guilt, and anxiety. Judas lost the true reality that he always had been, and always would be, loved by God. He couldn't find a way to stay open to the light of Christ.

I want to emphasize again that we are not depression. We are God's children, and the problem tries to deceive us into thinking we are the same as depression. That's why I don't like to hear, "she is depressed," or "I am depressed." I remember a woman who came for help. She told me she had been depressed her whole life. Her doctor said she was depressed, her parents treated her as depressed, her school saw her as depressed, and she considered herself that way. I asked if there had ever been a time that she was not under the spell of depression. "No," she said, "I just told you I've been depressed for thirty years!" "Could you recall a time that depression was less severe?" I asked her. She said it has been all the same. As I persisted, she became annoyed. "Was there a time in the last year that you felt less distress?" I persisted. "Look, you idiot," she shot back, "what about my story? Don't you get it?"

I asked my final question: "Could there have been a bit of light or hope you felt in the past weeks or months?" She became silent, paused for a moment, and shifted her body. "I felt good two weeks ago," she said as a matter of fact. "So depression doesn't have full control over you?" I asked. She smiled, and we continued to uncover times when she had stood up to depression. We continued to search for stories that spoke of her abilities, when she felt more herself. We committed to work on creating small steps in the direction she wanted her life to go.

The person suffering from depression generally experiences shame and guilt, leading him into more disgrace, hiding, and isolation.

Interviewer: What shadows does depression cast upon other relationships, especially in families? If a family ignores a depressed member, might that person sooner or later simply "snap out of it?"

Father Tom: There is still a huge stigma attached to mental illness. A family might become embarrassed and try to hide the problem. They might avoid the need for help or understanding. The person suffering from depression generally experiences shame and guilt, leading him into more disgrace, hiding, and isolation. It's as if the weight of the world is on him. "Just ignore the problem," he tells himself, "and it will go away." This pretending makes the depression worse by reinforcing that they are the problem. People with depression cannot merely "pull themselves together" and "snap out of it."

For some, perhaps depression is like a flashing red light, warning that something desperately needs tending, attention, and love.

Our culture wants to find a cure and fix everything. It fails to understand that it is essential to care for the soul, and let God and the other person work it out.

We want problems to go away. We are desperate for the magic pill. We want to do it our way, relying on ourselves, not God! Remember, Jesus was in the darkness of the tomb for three days. Sometimes we are in the darkness for days, weeks, or months before our hearts are resurrected and renewed with life! We need to take action by being kind and caring toward such a person. Perhaps depression is giving someone valuable information about life, but they are afraid or don't know how to listen to their soul. For some, perhaps depression is like a flashing red light, warning that something desperately needs tending, attention, and love. As family members, perhaps we can sit with our loved ones, hold their hand (if they will let us), and just cry with them, rather than giving suggestions about finding solutions. It is so important to be available, to communicate that you care.

Interviewer: Powerful psychotherapeutic drugs are available to relieve depression and anxiety. Do these drugs offer permanent help, or perhaps mask underlying problems? What side effects could occur with these drugs?

Father Tom: I believe that when a person becomes committed to reclaim his life from anxiety or depression by seeking help from God, friends, and community, medication could help the process. There is nothing shameful about taking medication, and you will not have to take it for life! You are not weak for having the courage to do what it takes to get back on your feet! A therapeutic dose can assist someone to do what is necessary to reclaim their life from depression.

But I've found that when my clients begin therapy and medication at the same time, they credit the medication for feeling better. They don't know how to claim the Holy Spirit's or their own role in this victory. So I invite them to see, acknowledge, and accept the personal steps they took alongside the medication that helped them recover from the darkness they felt trapped in. We must remember that we can do nothing without God, but once we ask for help and dedicate our lives to finding it, the power the problem has over us generally diminishes.

What is not helpful is saying, "Snap out of it! Don't be depressed!"

Interviewer: Most people undoubtedly have one or more family members or friends who are depressed, anxious, or lonely. What could each of us do to help someone suffering from despair, and what actions or words on our part are not helpful?

Father Tom: What is not helpful is saying, "Snap out of it! Don't be depressed! How could you be so depressed when your life is wonderful? You have your kids and lots of money. Things aren't really that bad!" Another goofy response is "I know what you're going through." Hearing people say that just kills me. You don't know what the other person is going through! Never assume what the other person is feeling. And never assume you are the expert in another person's life. They are the expert. Our job is to love and encourage them to put their trust in God. Watch how you give suggestions, because when someone can barely function, most of the time advice is not helpful.

What could be helpful is to invite them to talk about their life, to be really interested in their story—what they are feeling and what they are experiencing. If you get to this point, two great questions might be, "When have you felt in any way most like yourself?" or, "Have you noticed the grips of depression loosening even the tiniest bit?" Communicate that you value them. Communicate, without minimizing the depths of despair, and that they will get through this dark time. You might call to let him know you are thinking about him. Send affectionate notes. You might invite her to Church, the movies, concerts, parties, or other events. Chances are she won't respond, but she will notice your efforts and appreciate them. The key is to be guided by Christ's love and compassion, not fear! A person suffering from depression is keenly aware of your genuine motive to embrace her in the pain, in the darkness, and to behold her beauty when she cannot. Above all, include her in your prayers, and be open and tuned in to God's advice to you.

Interviewer: The end result of severe depression could end in self-destruction. If someone we know or live with is depressed, what red flags should we listen for in their remarks, and what should we do about what we hear?

Father Tom: Again, look for red flags of hopelessness, helplessness, resignation, and lack of activity. One guy screamed at me because nobody understood how deep in this dark place he was. He could barely get out of bed. But he went to work. I asked him, "How come depression couldn't get you to stop work?" His response was, "I needed to survive." "What do you think that says about you," I asked, "that in the depths of the pit of darkness and despair, you have the courage and energy to live? What do you think it says about your abilities, your strength, your gifts?" Many times we focus on just the negative, the pain and the tears, and we don't see how God is hidden in the pain, waiting to be invited to have a voice.

Interviewer: If you could tell a depressed person to do three or four specific things, what would they be?

Father Tom: I would help him see that baby steps can lead to great victories. I would fish for stories that spoke of his God-given gifts and abilities. I would ask if there were moments when he felt a bit hopeful, had a bit more energy. What kind of person was he before the depression got real bad? Who did he feel he was? What did he like? I would wonder about his

ideas of how depression works. I would ask him to interview other people, and find out what, with God's grace, they had done to reclaim their life from problems like depression.

It might be helpful to suggest seeking help from a priest, friend, or counselor. Confession is another powerful vehicle of our Church to lift the burden of sin and respond to depression's deceptions about life. Someone was given the great advice to list the thoughts that depressed her and to confess them before a priest. We have an inner desire to be known and be understood unconditionally by God and others.

One wonderful woman in the depths of despair came to my office and spent most of the session in tears. She didn't know how to move forward. As she told her story of pain, she briefly mentioned not having the energy to fix her eyeglass case—the Velcro had been torn away. She looked at me and said, "See how pathetic I am—I can't even fix this darnn case!" I asked if she could find the strength to buy some Crazy Glue on her way home, to fix her glass case. She came back the next week with a smile on her sweet face and a twinkle in her eye, saying that she had fixed her glass case. A sign of life!

Interviewer: What hope for permanent change and relief from the black hole of depression does our Orthodox faith hold out to us?

Father Tom: Our faith maintains that we are unique, and that if we desire it, God will do what it takes to make us partakers of the Divine Nature. Our faith asks us to be vigilant, hopeful, and patient. Our job is to be a vessel for the Holy Spirit to direct, fashion, and shape our lives. It is also to be fully known by another, and that is the importance of a spiritual confessor. A spiritual father should be able to embrace you, even when you feel empty, unworthy, and ugly. He should be able to behold your true beauty at various stages in life. When we keep our eyes on Jesus, we will find ways not to sink when depression comes knocking on our door.



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Some Psychological Aspects of Dependency in Pastoral Settings

For many spiritual fathers the dependency of their spiritual children starts as a dream that later turns into a nightmare. In the beginning, the priest's narcissism is stroked by the spiritual child's affability, obedience, and cooperation. This gives the spiritual father a feeling of satisfaction, of being good in his pastoral role. But after a period of time the spiritual father can sometimes find himself suffocating under the weight of his spiritual child's adulation, wondering how he got to such a place. As a result, the priest not infrequently starts behaving in a way that makes him begin hating himself, in his efforts to detach the person who has clung to him so tightly.

Psychiatric knowledge can help spiritual fathers cope with those personalities susceptible to an unhealthy dependency and provide the tools to interpret their cloying and often annoying behavior. However, what is more important in such situations is prevention. Is there any means we can use that will allow us to prevent such an unhealthy dependency from developing?

It is more than certain that cases of unhealthy dependency will never be completely extinguished from the life of the Church. There will always be people whose existential journey will pass through dependency. More correctly, such persons will not in fact experience their existential journey. Instead, they will exchange it for the feeling of absolute safety, by renouncing their responsibility for their lives. But responsibility means freedom, which is an ontological gift offered to humanity by God; thus the dependent person is actually a handicapped person, someone who denies an essential component of human nature.

In order to prevent unhealthy dependency in one's spiritual children, it is necessary to understand that freedom is more important than safety. A glance at the diagnostic criteria for dependent personality disorder is very instructive about the pervasive need of some people for security and protection. A person with dependent personality disorder "has difficulty making decisions, needs others to assume responsibilities for him, has difficulty expressing disagreements, volunteers to do unpleasant things, feels helpless when alone, is preoccupied with fears of being left, clings to another when left, and lacks self-confidence". The price paid for such security and protection by a person suffering from this disorder is absolute conformity with the spiritual guidance one receives and the tailoring of one's own life along the character and the demands of the spiritual father (who, by all this, runs the risk of not being spiritual any more).

training that focuses on personality theory and psychopathology could engender both knowledge and self-awareness in a clergyman

To a lesser degree, other personality disorders such as histrionic, avoidant and obsessive-compulsive, can present dependency features as well. The amount of pathology in each situation is associated with such factors as the coherence of ego structure, the urgency of the need for safety, the possible eroticization of the relationship, tolerance of frustration, possible mental co-morbidity, and the presence of other simultaneous dependent ties.

I have left more time to discuss borderline personality disorder because I find it useful to focus on it. In my opinion, ignorance of its peculiarities makes for one of the major problems in contemporary ecclesiastical life. Obviously I will not deal with borderline subjects living outside the Church, although they might present pastoral troubles when they attach to a priest asking for, say, a cure from their despair or addiction.

Borderline personalities are very likely to convert; this is the moment at which they become quite interesting for pastoral psychology. We need the assistance of psychoanalysis in order to understand their conversion and its vicissitudes. The inner world of the borderline person is characterized by a fundamental instability of the internal object of love, and this is the reason he suffers from a fear of abandonment and from oscillations of mood. Beliefs follow instability unless he is able to achieve the firm organization of his life around a certain center, which very often is religion. Because religion carries an eternal validity and a divine reliability, it makes a rather safe harbor in which to anchor and find shelter. In addition, its moral requirements can canalize his diffused life and eliminate its painful adventures.

Sometimes creating dependency is the only way a priest has to feel useful

The enemy of this kind of enterprise is immanent instability. The borderline personality knows only extremes. This is the reason why he tries to attach onto a clergyman and to adopt firm and unchangeable ideas. Borderlines converting can be valuable members of

the Church because they devote themselves to ecclesiastical tasks; nevertheless, they are (after those who are paranoid) the most apt to be fanatics. Due to their history of fluctuation, they have to cling strongly to ideas as if they were beloved persons. If they do not depend closely on persons and ideas, they feel they are very loosely connected to the Church; the fear of the opposite extreme becomes a serious threat.

In order to protect themselves they sometimes urge the priest to be stricter in his teaching and blame him for "compromising." They can be aggressively critical of other faithful in their unconscious effort to punish themselves for their own previous prodigal life. They fight for tradition and express an oversimplified theology of a black-and-white type.

Their dependency usually is not as annoying as that of a person with dependent personality disorder. They leave at least some personal space to the priest to breathe. But the real danger for their spiritual father is that they can alter him, they can gradually assimilate him to their own beliefs. Of course this can happen only with priests who have hidden similar traits of which they are unaware.

This point brings us to a crucial issue in cases of unhealthy dependency: counter-transference. Dependency becomes very difficult to develop when the spiritual father is adequately aware of his latent passions either to exercise power and control, or to become a fanatic. The presence of a converted borderline functions as a projective test which allows the priests' unconscious desires to emerge. This procedure gives dependency a mutuality which makes recovering much more difficult. Consequently, a pastor's self-awareness seems to be the best preventive method.

Training can help as well. Actually, a training that focuses on personality theory and psychopathology could engender both knowledge and self-awareness in a clergyman.

Supervision adds empirical learning through a detailed examination of pastor's faults. By clearly identifying his vulnerable points the spiritual father can avoid the traps that his parishioners will inevitably create.

A healthy theology is also indispensable so that the morbid tensions of the pastor will not be justified. Dostoyevsky showed us that the Grand Inquisitor's arguments are based both on his narcissistic pathology and on a distorted theological view of humanity. He underestimates human potential. His thirst for power and control is disguised under a mask of care and love for humanity. He thinks that human beings are so weak and miserable that they cannot carry the weight of their responsibility and have to exchange freedom for safety and certainty. Ultimately, the Grand Inquisitor's ambition is to correct God's "mistakes". As the starets Zossimas advises, when someone repeats a lie often enough a person will finally come to believe it. So the spiritual father may sometimes deceive himself that he does only what is necessary for the faithful in his care when in reality he just enhances the latter's dependency and helplessness - or sometimes even creates them. Sometimes creating dependency is the only way a priest has to feel useful.

Another theological point to deal with is the generalized application of monastic practice and mentality on families and on everyday common life. Apparently it stems from a real admiration and a deep desire for ascetic spirituality; covertly it often hides either a "spirituality of power"

or a fear of the world. By attempting to imitate monks in their taking no initiative and asking for everything, one assures himself that he is making spiritual progress.

As a final comment, I would like to stress the need for a more ecclesiological consistent development of the Church as a way of prevention. When the Body of Christ is organized on the basis of love among its members and on the function of their charismata, the burden imposed on the spiritual father decreases because the susceptible person finds his position enhanced through healthier relationships with his brothers and sisters in the Body. However, when congregational life is tuned exclusively around the priest, dependency is facilitated and the faithful are not assisted in maturing toward their spiritual destination which is, according to Saint Paul, "holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God" (Col. 2, 19). The Eucharist links people not only with God but with each other. The priest is the leader of a Body, and this means that his mission is to serve its unity as well, so that the members of the Body function normally and in a healthy manner, in communion and not in dependency.



—Rev. Vasileios Thermos, M.D., Ph.D.
A talk presented at the International
Conference of Orthodox psychotherapists,
England, 2001

Pastoral Encounters of the Weird Kind

Clergy often find themselves in absolutely wacky conversations. Forget about the verbatims analyzed as part of hospital ministry training and the books on pastoral counseling that occupy an entire shelf of the pastor's library. Nothing at seminary could ever prepare a young man for the awkward and often absurd exchanges that pass for priest-parishioner communication.

Here are five of my favorites:

The Ambush

Liturgy is over. The priest thinks his sermon hit the mark. Attendance was strong and the choir wasn't half-bad. Feeling pretty good about life, he walks unsuspectingly into coffee hour only to be greeted by the parish gossip: "Mrs. So-and-So is very upset that you didn't thank her for preparing last week's fellowship luncheon."

"But I did thank her, at the luncheon and in the bulletin."

"The whole parish wasn't at the luncheon and nobody reads the bulletin. You should have said something after Liturgy."

The poor pastor has been so soundly knocked off center that he doesn't know whether to commit a violent act or finally sign up for stockbroker training. More likely than not, he'll say something he'll come to regret. This priest has been the victim of a prime example of a pathological parish encounter.

The Ambush takes other forms. Walking down the hall, the parish "Godfather" grabs the priest by the elbow and pulls him into an empty Sunday School room. "Step into my office, Father, I want to tell you what they said about you last night at the Slobovian Men's Club."

The Ambush can happen in public. At the annual Parish Assembly, a "well-intentioned" member stands up. "I'd like to ask Father a question: What do you intend to do about the fact that our children don't speak Slobovian?"

How should the priest respond to an ambusher? Say something like: "It sounds like this subject is very important to you, and I cannot give it proper treatment in this setting. Please make an appointment to come by my office so that we can discuss it adequately."

If the person comes by the priest's office, then they were probably sincere in their concern. If they never mention the subject again, chances are their only motive in speaking to their pastor was to put him on the spot.

Where's Presvytera?

If the priest's wife (presvytera) is sick, out of town visiting her parents, chaperoning a school trip, or at the law library cramming for finals -- anywhere except at a parish event, there is always one "concerned" member of the flock who will come up to the pastor and ask "Where's Presvytera?"

This question is really a statement: "I'm here. Why isn't your wife? Isn't that why we pay you?!"

Rookie priests only step further into the quagmire when they try to answer this question.

"She's visiting her parents."

"Well, it's Sunday. I certainly hope that she's going to church wherever she is."

Like the antidote to the Ambush, there is a simple way of handling the "innocent" question: "Why do you ask?" (By the way, this is the

perfect response to most inappropriate questions.) A person's response to that question reveals immediately if he is compassionate or just plain noseey. It might take 50 times, but a steady diet of "Why do you ask?" will sink into the skulls of even the most obstinate attendance monitors.

Can We Talk in Confidence?

Canon law demands that priests take the confidentiality of the sacrament of Confession very seriously. But the naive clergyman needs to perk up his ears every time someone comes into his office and asks "Can we talk in confidence?"

This can be the most sincere of questions leading to true repentance. It is also the classic query of the manipulative and passive-aggressive personality who wants to place the priest in a no-win situation.

"Father, can we talk in confidence?"

"Sure."

"I heard that the girls' volleyball coach is living with her boyfriend."

What does the priest do with this? Confront the coach? If he does, he'll look like an idiot, especially if the accusation is wrong. Ignore the situation? He'll look like a hypocrite, especially if it's true. This is why Can We Talk in Confidence is such an effective weapon of those who like to watch clergy squirm.

An honest, pastoral, and necessary question trumps the technique: "Is this Confession?"

If the answer is "no," then the priest says, "Then I can't promise confidence."

If the answer is “yes,” then he says, “Let’s go into the sanctuary.”

Let Me Tell You a Few Things About Yourself

This is the probably the most ungracious and mean-spirited tactic employed by contentious persons who want to “help” their priest. It has several variants:

“Father, I’d like to tell you why I don’t like you.”

“Father, here’s what people are saying about you.”

“Father, let me tell you a few things about yourself.”

These questions and their cousins all demand the same answer:

“Why?”

Very often the priest’s “Why” elicits a follow-up question: “What do you mean, ‘Why’?”

“What I mean is: Why do you feel compelled to tell me about myself? I didn’t ask for your opinion of my performance or behavior.”

One of two things will happen. The person who is looking for a confrontation will back off and move on to the next subject. The faithful Christian who truly has the priest’s back will say, “Because I love you and respect you and want to see you succeed in your work to spread the Gospel and help people.” If a person gives that answer, humble yourself and listen carefully.

I Guess We’ll Just Have to Agree to Disagree

This pithy proclamation can be an honest conciliation of one friend with another, or a gambit used to shut down dialogue when someone finds himself on the losing end of a discussion.

If I hand you a cup of coffee and say “Take a sip, this is really a good cup of coffee,” you might disagree with me.

“Too much hazelnut -- flavored coffees don’t do too much for me.”

“I’ll guess we’ll just have to agree to disagree,” is an appropriate response.

If I hand you a cup of coffee and you tell me that it’s a giraffe, I’m not going to nod in concord.

Instead, I will say, “No, this is cup of coffee, not a giraffe.”

If you respond, “I’ll guess we’ll just have to agree to disagree,” I won’t agree with you.

Let’s look at an example. The choir and the priest are discussing Church music. Some in the choir prefer traditional Slobovian chant; others want to sing music from Slobovia’s neighbor, Cracovia; and then there are fans of the experimental non-traditional liturgies that have sprouted up like mushrooms in America over the past 50 years. All are passionate about their favorite musical style. A musical direction is established, knowing that everyone won’t be happy. “I’ll guess we’ll just have to agree to disagree,” is a fitting way to move to the next topic.

Take another example. The priest tells the choir that it will only improve if its members rehearse regularly. One person blurts out, “I’ve been singing in the choir all my life and we’ve never made a big deal about practicing.”

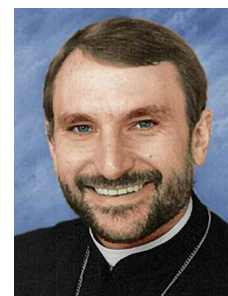
“I know,” says the priest, “but I’ve been a musician my whole life and ensembles only get better when the members practice together.” Offering instead, “I’ll guess we’ll just have to agree to disagree” is juvenile, antagonistic, and disingenuous.

The antidote is found when the priest seizes this teachable moment: He must take the time to help those present differentiate between subjective opinions based on feelings, and objective opinions that square with real life.


Parish priests preach or teach at least 20 times per month. They participate in at least that many conversations every two days. All persons who are in the public eye are going to say things that wish they could take back. But a clergyman can minimize the number of times that he puts his foot in his mouth if he recognizes that not all conversations are predicated on noble intentions.

The next time you walk into an Ambush, are asked Where’s Presvytera? or Can We Talk in Confidence?, hear the words Let Me Tell You a Few Things About Yourself or I Guess We’ll Just Have to Agree to Disagree, be ready with a constructive response. You might just find yourself making a pastoral breakthrough.

Otherwise, just go to Starbucks and look at the giraffes.



—Rev. Aris Metrakos
Pastor, Holy Trinity Church
Columbia, SC



the Priesthood

Contemporary and Classic Excerpts

Sermons on Being a Bishop

The cares of my office have been a cause of anxiety to me since the day on which that burden was placed on my shoulders and of which I know I must give a rigorous account. Unless the Lord helps us carry our burdens, we shall sink beneath them. My position at your head frightens me, but the condition I share with you consoles me. I am a bishop set over you, but a Christian in company with you. The first is the name of the office I have undertaken, the second is of grace; the first of danger, the second of salvation. The fact that I have been redeemed with you delights me more than the fact that I have been set over you.

Every man, without exception, is weak. And who is the person set over you but someone just like yourself? Your pastor is in the flesh; he is mortal. He eats, sleeps and awakens. He was born and he is going to die. He is, in himself, simply a man.

So I must distinguish carefully between two aspects of the role that the Lord has given me, a role that demands rigorous accountability, a role based on the Lord's greatness rather than my own merit. The first aspect is that I am a Christian; the second, that I am a bishop. I am a Christian for my own sake, whereas I am a bishop for your sake. In addition to the fact that I am a Christian and must give God an account of my life, I as a bishop must give Him an account of my stewardship as well. The higher our position, the greater is our danger.

The vice that those who feed Christ's sheep have to guard themselves against most of all is seeking their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ, and using those for whom Christ's blood was shed to further their own ambitions. There are shepherds who want to have the title of pastor, but do not want to fulfill a pastor's duties. True shepherds take care of their sheep, not themselves. The pastor who leads an evil life

before the people he shepherds kills the sheep under his care. He is a murderer.

You must make my office fruitful. You are the field that God cultivates. In Christ's name you are God's people, members of Christ, undivided in unity. You are in communion with the apostles; you share the memory of the holy martyrs scattered throughout the world. There is one head, one body, one Christ. There is therefore the Shepherd of shepherds, the shepherds who belong under the one Shepherd, and the sheep with their shepherds under the one Shepherd. Pray for me, that with whatever spirit there is in my body, and with whatever strength I have, I might serve you in God's Word.

—*St. Augustine of Hippo*
(354 – 430 AD)

APC-NSP Benevolent Fund

One of the most important things that we can do as clergy is care for each other and one another's families. More than a decade ago, the Archdiocesan Presbyters Council and the National Sisterhood of Presvyteres established a benevolent fund to assist clergy families in crisis.

Through the combined efforts of the APC and NSP many clergy families across the nation, faced with a personal crisis and in need of emergency financial assistance, have been helped through difficult times with our Gifts of Love program. Over the past two years, Gifts of Love relief checks totaling over \$40,000 were provided to 16 clergy families during their time of need.

We need your help! We can only continue to support our fellow clergy families in their time of need with your donations. Without this annual request, the APC/NSP Benevolent Fund could soon be depleted.

We ask you to donate whatever you are able to the APC-NSP Benevolent Fund, prayerfully keeping in mind our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, who will be assisted through your generosity.

On behalf of all the clergy families who have already received these gifts and all those who will receive gifts in the future, thank you.

Please make your check payable to: APC-NSP Benevolent Fund.

And please mail to: APC-NSP Benevolent Fund
Presvytera Stephanie Panagos
34 Paula Lane
Waterford, CT 06385

The Archdiocesan Permanent Diaconate Program at Holy Cross

The diaconate, as an office and ministry, is rooted in the very nature of the Church herself precisely as servant. The diaconate, as an ordination, is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. If we are going to be faithful to the Scriptures as well as to the liturgical and canonical traditions of the Church, the diaconate must be seen as essential to the ministerial structure of the Church.

The Permanent Diaconate Program (PDP) is an educational and formational initiative of the Holy Eparchial Synod of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. The program is intended for individuals who are interested in serving the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America as deacons and is designed to prepare individuals for permanent service to the Church as deacons. Upon successful completion of the program, students will receive a Certificate of Study.

The program does not meet the requirements for ordination to the priesthood nor is the program a first step in the process leading towards ordination to the priesthood.

The two one-week summer sessions will be held during the first two weeks of August. Each session begins on Monday morning and ends in the afternoon on Friday of the same week.

For more information, please access the HC/HC website at www.hchc.edu/holycross/academics/PDP.html

Summer Sessions

Week 1: August 4-8, 2008

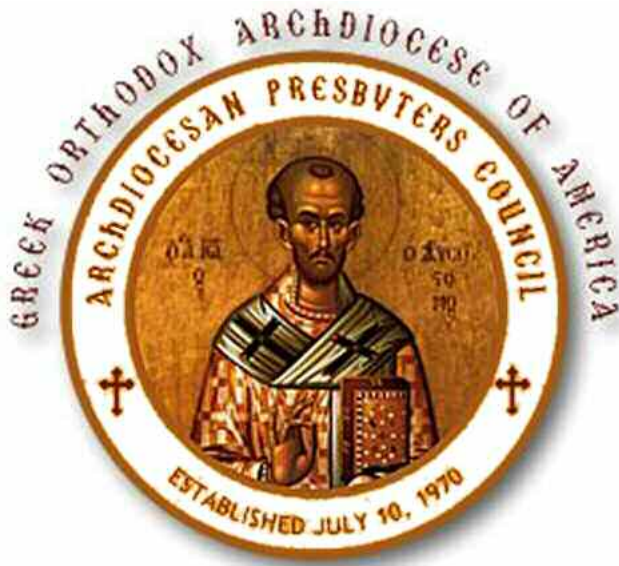
Week 2: August 11-15, 2008

Tuition: \$800 per week



The Presbyter

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A.P.C. 2006-2008

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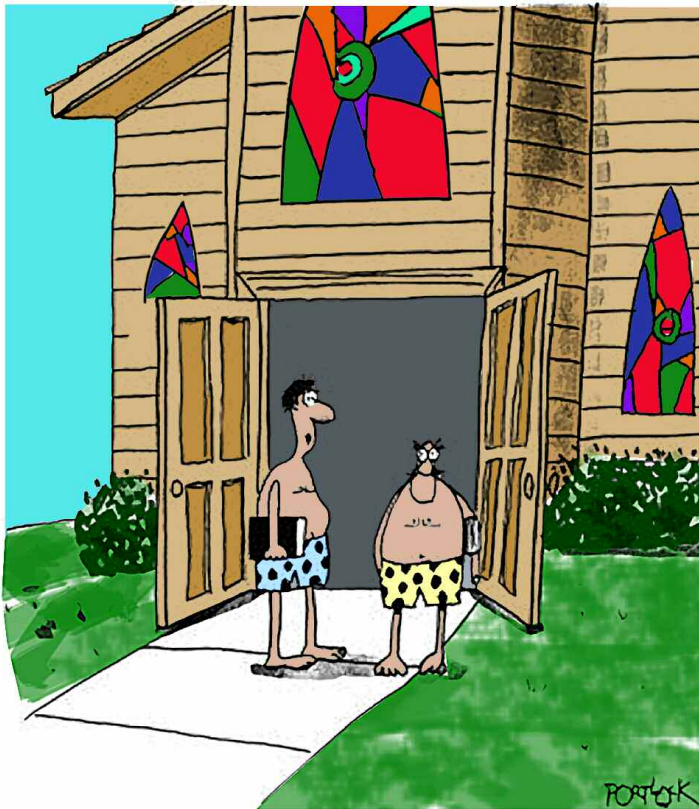
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"That was the best sermon on giving I've ever heard."