

## **Pastoral Life Colloquium: April 29, 2015**

Session I explored issues of honesty and communication, probing particularly into those experiences or incidents in which transparency has been degraded or otherwise compromised. What was clear from the results is that there is room for improvement in laying out proper channels of communication, both locally and nationally. How each diocese negotiates the necessary flow of information, indeed, how each deanery manages this same, can vary significantly. For new clergy or for those whose linguistic or cultural background is different than that present in a given setting, a tutorial may be beneficial to help offset the unease that they often experience when called to pass or receive information between ranks or levels of hierarchy. Additionally, greater sensitivity needs to be exercised at all levels both to acknowledge differences between communities and differences between clergy, i.e., what some may find normal should not be assumed to be normative. Diversity needs to be noted and appreciated particularly in marking or enunciating what success can or should mean. Accolades are due for every priest who serves his people whether this is with an abundance of funerals or an abundance of chrismations or an abundance of neither.

The deans, as moderators between diocesan and more immediately local voices, need to own their roles in a very real way; theirs is an important point of intersection. They must moderate that in-between space both as valued members of their own regional brotherhoods and as representatives, on the one side, of the interests of their local presbyterate in conversation with the hierarchy and, on the other, as representatives of the diocesan voice amidst these same presbyters. Additionally, since their role is local, their eyes ought to be focused locally, and they should be trained to recognize needs and to offer assistance, support, and resources to those they see struggling.

Finally, there is a grave need for good and trusted (by priests, which is sometimes not the same thing as trusted by hierarchs) confessors and for needs-based groups wherein pastors feel they can be accountable in addressing issues in their own lives. Such things will help maintain their spiritual health and equilibrium. However, because the focus of so much of their pastorate is in providing these or similar services to others, they are often not attentive to the fact that they share the same needs. That said, some have found successful ways to address this, and any attempted solution must be respectful of the fact that, in almost every case, clergy are doing the best they can with what they have. Education and programs that seek to rise to this challenge should be invitational, striving to preach that better things are possible not simply that broken things are present.

Session II delved into self-care and the results of its absence. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done in educating the entire Church on this issue. Simply put, priests are not at this time understood to be the best investment when working towards Church health. Indeed, investment in the health and growth of clergy may in some cases be said to have ended upon graduation from seminary. Resources and energy are allocated for many endeavors on national, diocesan, and parish levels but rarely

on sustaining or encouraging the priest and family in their ministry and personal growth. In addition, there are sometimes negative perspectives thrust upon clergy from their peers. That one may be expected to “pay one’s dues” or be initiated into service through unnecessary or inappropriate suffering threatens at times to occlude the very real need for help, support, or intervention particularly for new or newly assigned priests.

Working out the balance between sacrifice and neglect is a great challenge and one not ever surmounted. The needs of parish, family, and individual never stay settled, so the proportions of giving and allocating can never truly be finalized. Clergy must be taught to work through this instability and embrace it as a part of their ascesis; in this, they will assuredly be greatly aided by building trusting relationships with their seniors and peers.

There is a terrible need for healthy, non-competitive, non-judgmental camaraderie between people who are struggling to be at home and at peace within the same vocation, called to the same life. The selective nature of ordination and commitment to parish ministry contains already the seeds of a potential unifying force. By fostering a positive perception of the priestly life as a high calling and one of tremendous lived sacrifice, those devoted to ministry can rejoice and take pride in being part of some chosen few. But the sacrifices must be healthy and the reminders of this ongoing.

From episcopacy to parish council and every point in between, priests should be encouraged to exercise self-care, and they would benefit by some training in the process of fruitful self-reflection. When this is lacking the warning signs are numerous but relatively consistent. As mentioned above, local clergy leaders need to be attentive to these and, equipped with the right skills and instruction, be comfortable with their charge to aid those in need. Likewise, wives of clergy need a venue in which they can be honest and heard and also a secure means in which to make their concerns known since they, perhaps best of all, can be the earliest source of warning.

Finally, the Church needs to take seriously parish ministry as a family vocation. Family dynamics are and will change, but investment of resources and interest and care must be given to all who bear the very real burdens of such sacrifice.

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