

Priest — A Man of Prayer

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never really face them. A common example to me relates to the area of sexuality. In my years as a priest and in particular when I had the privilege of being spiritual director, I met a fair number of men and women who have been victims of fear in questions relative to their sexuality.

In some instances they were enslaved by the habit of masturbation. For all of their good will and strong efforts — sometimes heroic — they were not able to escape the slavery. Prayer alone didn't do it; the rationalization that it was after all okay and a normal part of sexual development never brought peace. What always seemed to give birth to new freedom was the ability to share as fully as possible at a given time their interiority, including their worst fears, dreadful imaginings, most urgent lusting. So that in the presence of a friend they could let the light of the Gospel dispel the darkness of their spirit. They began to see that lack of freedom often eradicated guilt, but they began to work on reclaiming their freedom.

The breakthrough often came with the first efforts to do this and frequently grew into larger victory and new freedom. Prayer and discipline remained essential but the heart of the new freedom was often the communication I have described.

Let me mention two other examples which I have run into with some frequency. The first is episodic or environmental homosexuality. It is not rare for young men and women to have homosexual experiences in the normal course of their growing years (whenever those years occur in chronological time). That is true to a higher degree when young men and women are placed in environments in which their principal associations are with persons of the same sex. It can also be true in times of particular stress or at times of radical changes in life circumstances.

I wish I had a nickel for every person I have known who has carried such a burden around in memory for many years — who has confessed what he/she has judged to be a sin (or who from fear has not even done that) but who has never expressed the fear and doubts about him or her self born of that experience. Inevitably that person's ability finally to talk about him or her self in that way has meant a new life.

For the second example I would like to return to anger. This is a tricky theme and one hard to deal with. There is a lot of it around in our age. I experience it myself. Sometimes I can identify its source (interior or exterior) and sometimes, although I try, I cannot. But I do know that it is always healthy for me to try to know these things and to speak aloud to someone else what my self awareness is at that moment. Once again, it is healthy because it helps me to know why I do things; when I know more about the spiritual movements putting claims on my soul, I can

make more human choices; when I make more human choices I love better.

The point is, I guess, that anger and fear and resentment, when unrecognized or not dealt with, can draw great reserves of energy from my spirit; they diminish our ability to relate freely and openly with others; they make us stiff and leave little strength for the challenge of growth in ministry.

In summary let me observe that there is little constructive, incarnational, truly human spiritual growth which does not take into account our emotional life. There is as a consequence little fruit in spiritual dialogue which does not include one's willingness to convey simply and humbly even what we judge to be the dark facts of our interior reality. This applies to relationships which may have begun in healthy, open spirit, but which have now taken a depth or direction which put you on a course which is self-destructive and/or destructive of others. We must have support in times like that and we need to be properly accountable in the external order when the impact of our behavior affects the common good.

People are slow to approach the preoccupied, the fearful or the angry priest. But they are attracted like bees to honey when they meet one who communicates by the way he is available to them that he is dealing honestly and consistently with his own need to grow as a person.

And so, in the spirit of these remarks, I raise the following questions for your prayer, thought and discussion:

- How do I appreciate myself?
- How do I respond when people compliment me? When they confront me? Thank me? Criticize me?
- How do I handle loneliness?
- How do I handle anger?
- Am I peaceful about my psychosexual maturity? Am I able to speak about this with anyone else?
- Do I have friends with whom I can speak about my own interiority?
- What is my relationship to my bishop? To my brother priests?
- Am I involved in any relationships that compromise my commitment to celibate chastity or the rights or dignity of any other person?
- Do I have a friend or two who are free enough to tell me when I am acting blindly or irresponsibly or in some other destructive manner?

3. THE BODY — If I am not expert about our emotions, I am certainly not expert in questions of the body and its well being. But once again let me share my own thoughts and questions concerning our bodily health and its relation to growth in ministry.

We owe it to our God, our people and ourselves to take care of our bodies. It is a matter of good stewardship because the body is a gift of God and one of our principal resources for active ministry.

"Mens sana in corpore sano" is an epigram which sums up a long tradition which acknowledges the link between bodily and mental/emotional health.

I ask you please to follow the ordinary counsels of the experts who call us to eat a balanced and nutritious diet, to exercise with vigor three times a week for thirty minutes each time, to take an adequate amount of rest. This requirement varies from person to person, but I read recently that a good rule of thumb is at least seven hours of sleep at least four nights a week.

In addition to these positive steps we can take in the areas of nutrition, exercise and rest, I would like to mention what I call enrichment recreation — reading, music, theater, walks, hobbies, poetry, conversations with friends and just sitting. We all need a certain amount of that to keep us human and to provide the space for our contemplative capacities to grow. I urge you once again to have one day a week for yourself, and to take adequate vacation time.

On another tack, we need to be discriminating in how we treat our bodies. I happen to be a reformed two-pack-a-day Pall Mall smoker who was hooked on the weeds for 18 years and I think I can honestly say I have never been an anti-smoking crusader. Yet, the evidence suggests that it is a very damaging habit. I know from personal experience that the withdrawal from nicotine dependence can be a miserable journey for a while, but I can also tell you that freedom from it is a great joy. It may be possible during this season to transform a decision requiring a good measure of raw discipline into a gesture of true Christian asceticism with good results for ourselves and especially for our young people.

What about alcohol? I am not against drink and I am not interested that you be either. All I will do here is to raise some questions about alcohol consumption in light of its acknowledged dangers. I hope they will help you to consider this question which has such a serious impact on the bodily and mental health of a large percentage of our population:

- Am I beginning to drink so I can mix in better with others?
- or to forget my troubles? or so I can really be myself?
- Do I begin to organize and reorganize my schedule to ensure plenty of time for a drink or two?
- Do I become annoyed with whomever or whatever interferes with that schedule?
- Am I ill at ease at social gatherings at which no alcohol is served?
- When I look back on my day or my week do I discover that I almost always have had time for a drink or two but hardly ever a time to pray or read as I would like?
- Do I try to cover up the quantity of alcohol I consume?

I mention alcohol in particular but for the word alcohol we could substitute food, drink, cigarettes, TV watching, tree sitting, stamp

collecting. What I really mean to address is any habit or area of life which is crowding our freedom, diminishing our capacity to grow, hurting our ability to be lovingly available to our people. In short, what are the things we do, that we would not do?

I am delighted that we have a clergy health board and wish to express public thanks to Father Jim Schwartz and Deacon Tony Marini for their leadership in this effort, and to all board members for their generous service.

It is the purpose of the board to provide the clergy of the diocese with assistance in dealing with sources of stress in their lives related to chemical dependency, physical and emotional health. This assistance will take the form of consultation, education and referral to treatment where indicated. I would like to invite you to contact any member of the board, if you wish to do that. Any approach you make to them is guarded by the strictest kind of ethical and ministerial confidentiality.

The board will work in concert with the Ministry to Priests team and the personnel director. It will provide the backup and expertise of health care professionals in a preventive and wholistic approach to health care.

I will ask the Clergy Health Board in conjunction with the Priests' Council to develop a program of regular and thorough physical examinations for all members of the presbyterate. I think we can do this in a way that will encourage and promote our well being and still respect properly the privacy of individuals.

4. INTELLECTUAL GROWTH — There is no doubt that we are in an era of an explosion of knowledge. I won't go into all of the ways in which we experience that now or will in the future — partly because I don't know all of the ways and partly because many are fairly obvious to all of us.

What we do need to know is that so many of these questions — reproductive and nuclear technology, the computer world, etc. — have great impact on how our people think and lead their lives.

It is not enough that our world is spinning as it is. The self-understanding of our Church has changed significantly in the same period of time. Vatican Council II continues to be a major challenge to us in its call to move with the Church so that we can live out in a pastorally effective way the implications of her new self-understanding.

It stands to reason, I guess, although I think it never hurts to state it in an assembly, such as this, that we will perish as a vital, serving body in the Church if we do not keep abreast of the basic societal and ecclesial directions of the day. If we are going to help our people to bring the light of the gospel to bear on the major questions of life and faith they are facing, then it

is absolutely essential that we continue to educate ourselves.

I am well aware of the difficulty of finding time and inner quiet necessary for good reading, but I cannot stress too much the importance of it. It will more and more be the bridge between your obvious desire to serve God's people and a fruitful translation of that desire into life-giving pastoral service.

That is one of the reasons I am happy about our sabbatical program. My hope is that it will enrich not only those who will be doing it in the near future but that those who have the opportunity will share the good fruits of their labors with their brother priests and the communities they serve. I hope, as well, that it is an effective sign to our people that we take very seriously the obligation we have continually to renew ourselves in those disciplines necessary for ministry in the contemporary Church.

Please review your own commitment to intellectual renewal and share with your brothers here ways in which you have tried to pursue it. Besides a good reading program, I commend to your thought and participation the offerings of St. Bernard's Institute, our excellent Program for Continuing Education, the Upstate New Pastors Conference and our Sabbatical Program.

I am always inclined to read books recommended to me. Because they have proved valuable to others, I am drawn to them rather than to other works which make up the mountain of material that could be read.

In keeping with that I asked Jim Schwartz and Bob Kennedy to sound out people in various fields and to compile a list of books covering areas of importance to us. I thank them for the stimulating list they have produced and am happy to share it with you. In the sharing, I ask that you try to work through the list by the time we meet here next year. If we could all do that, I believe many good things would happen for all kinds of people. If you have found any books or articles to be a special help to you, please pass the word on to Jim or Bob; I am sure they will let us know about it. At the very moment I finished reading over the last paragraph, John Firpo called from Washington to tell me he would be praying for us all these days. His call, besides being a beautiful bit of encouragement, was also a reminder to mention my commitment to graduate studies for the priests of the Diocese of Rochester. John and Doug Hoffman are at Catholic University, Kevin McKenna is in Rome. Bob Kennedy will be doing his doctoral work at Notre Dame. We cannot all be experts, but we have a common obligation as a local Church to have expert resource persons in our midst.

5. MINISTRY — It is almost four years now since I became the Bishop of Rochester. I can tell you in all honesty that they have been graced years for me and very happy ones. In 20 years of priestly life I have

been blessed to have many challenges which have called me to growth, but never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine what it would be like to break in as an Ordinary in another diocese.

I can best capsulize what it has been for me in a statement I have made to many when they ask me about these years: "I wouldn't trade a single moment of these years, but I'd hate like hell to go through them again."

That all relates to the wonderful faith, good will and genuine beauty of the people I am every day privileged to meet. The perspective they give me as a Bishop of the Church brings the beauty and mystery of our faith communion home to me in a way I never thought possible.

The capacity which our own local Church has to move into the future with faith and creativity is, I think, most encouraging. We are blessed in our presbyterate, in our religious communities and among our people with persons of exceptional gifts and great love for the faith.

I am grateful daily to be a part of this presbyterate and these people and judge being your bishop to be the greatest grace of my life, bar none, except baptism.

In all of that, I assure you, I experience to the very depths of my being the need to grow in ministry. Indeed for all the joys of my life, I have never felt so challenged to dispose of all my faculties of mind, body and heart to the service of the Church.

In a person so weak, limited and sinful, that means a considerable amount of growing pain, I assure you. I am no stranger to the feelings of loneliness, stress, being overworked and under-appreciated, not being able to say no, having too much demanded of me by too many people, feeling frustrated by my own inadequacies which many of you say are part of your priestly experience.

I also know that these are much better managed and less bothersome to me, and that I make good strides in dealing with them, when I keep central in my life the things I have been encouraging you to think through today.

Let me say that I need your affection and support for my own growth in ministry as much as I need food for my body and air for my lungs.

And I pledge you my own affection and support, with the note that I am never more conscious of my own weakness than when I make that commitment.

Finally, I share with you words written by Jerome Theisen, Abbot of St. John's Benedictine Monastery, Collegeville, Minn. The words come from the introduction of a volume of *Worship* (Vol. 57, 1, January, 1983) published as a postlude to our assembly of bishops last June.

I quote this passage from the introduction because it

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