

Growing through the Stress of Ministry

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Introduction

“Enough already! I have more meetings scheduled than the time to attend them! Why should I slave over yet another program for the same people who come to everything? What’s to become of me when labor outpaces leisure?”

Laments like these make caregivers feel more like “human doings” than “human beings.” The dissonance, depreciation, and depletion associated with loss, bereavement, and job turnover, with separation, divorce, and broken relationships put ministry itself under the microscope of stress-related illnesses. These and similar examples prove that we are all in some way faced with a serious predicament that affects us mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. A frequent lament we hear is that “no matter how much we do the results are so meager.” The covenant component of our ministry seems to evaporate in thin air. A few good results do not offset our feelings of failure.

This book does not pretend to treat the diseases associated with hypertension and the downswing from normal to abnormal stress. We have covered these topics more thoroughly in our trilogy of books titled *Stress and the Search for Happiness*; *Harnessing Stress: A Spiritual Quest*; and *Healthy and Holy Under Stress*. Our purpose here is to show that we can and must grow not in blessed relief from but in the midst of the stress of ministry. Without its pushes and pulls, we might forget the meaning of our call to follow Christ and carry his cross. The temptation we face daily is to escape the full implications of our consent to be disciples of a Master who found no place to lay his head (Matthew 8:20). The Son of God himself showed up at the Samaritan woman’s well so tired he could hardly take another step (John 4:6).

However, hopeless it may seem to us when stress is on the rise, we want to show that we can and ought to grow through this gift of God to us. The power of divine grace forms, reforms, and transforms our ministry when obstacles become openings

to praise and appreciation; when burdensome tasks prove to be blessings in disguise; when in the humiliation of seeming failure we celebrate the power and glory of God; when the cross of stress, joyfully carried, becomes for us and all those entrusted to our care a sign of renewed fidelity and abandonment to the mystery.

We pray that what we share in the chapters to follow will give everyone who ministers to individuals or groups in need of care these and many more reasons to sing with the psalmist:

May the glory of the LORD abide forever,
and may the LORD rejoice in his works
When he looks at the earth, it quakes;
when he touches the mountains, they smoke.

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have life.

May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I find my joy in the LORD.

May sinners be banished from the earth,
and may the wicked no longer exist.

Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Alleluia.

(Psalm 104:31-35)

Laying to Rest Ministerial Distress

On one occasion our good Lord said: Every kind of thing will be well; and on another occasion he said: You will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well. And from these two the soul gained different kinds of understanding.

One was this: that he wants us to know that he takes heed not only of things which are noble and great, but also of those which are little and small. . . . And this is what he means when he says: Every kind of thing will be well.

For he wants us to know that the smallest thing will not be forgotten. Another understanding is this: that there are many deeds which in our eyes are so evilly done and lead to such great harms that it seems to us impossible that any good result could ever come of them. And we contemplate this and sorrow and mourn for it so that we cannot rest in the blessed contemplation of God as we ought to do. And the cause is this: that the reason which we use is now so blind, so abject and so stupid that we cannot recognize God's exalted, wonderful wisdom, or the power and the goodness of the blessed Trinity. And this is his intention when he says:

You will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well, as if he said: Accept it now in faith and trust, and in the very end you will see truly, in fullness of joy.

And so in the same five words said before: I may make all things well, I understand a powerful comfort from all the works of our Lord God which are still to come.

—Julian of Norwich

"The harder I try the behinder I get." Remember that old saying? It suggests that our approach to ministerial stress may be off the beam. We want to rid ourselves of it, to lead tranquil lives, not to be bothered by so many problems. Perhaps it is time to take another approach: to lay this stress to rest by befriending it, to stop fighting our full schedules and learn to accept the challenges placed before us daily without complaints or regrets, trusting in the sacred pledge the Lord God made to the medieval mystic of Norwich that *all will be well*.

Modern life, from urban sprawl to the smallest village, makes relentless demands upon us. Technology that was supposed to save us time costs us more time everyday. Once we let go of our naive expectation that life without any stress would be perfect, we may begin to read the text of daily life with formative wisdom. We may see in it signs of God's providential call.

By entering into the dynamics inherent in every caregiving event, we feel a new sense of accomplishment. Banished are the politics of self-centered cleverness. Befriended is the mystery of binding our gifts and talents to a sustaining presence that shepherds us through the most trying circumstances. Christ forgives our faults. He shows us the way to complete what we started in a gracious and effective manner, full of mercy and self-giving love.

Ironically the distress we feel melts like ice on a warm day when we allow it to disclose the direction in which Christ asks us to go. Just as plants grow stronger when the soil around them is raked and fertilized, so we may bloom where we are planted and advance to new heights of spiritual and social maturity through the stress of ministry.

This shake-up disrupts our complacency. It is an unmistakable mark of maturation in Christ. Gentle yet firm nudgings by the Spirit set us on a fresh path to ministerial effectiveness. What we do flows from who we are. The Spirit purifies our hearts of overly stressful feelings of frustration, impotence, and irritation. Service becomes inseparable from contemplative presence to the Sacred.

The task of Christian ministry is a gift and an endowment that only the vivifying Spirit can bestow on our heart. No forced smile can substitute for this grace of inner transformation. From parish pews to the offices of professionals in every walk of life, from households to corporate centers, we realize that our inspiration to serve can only come from on high. We trust that if the wind and the seas listen to the Lord, he will be with us always and that we need not be afraid of the forces of evil that rage in any godless society (cf. Mark 4:35-41).

Seeking Transformation of Heart

The dynamic strivings and expressions characteristic of ministry in Christ flow from five centralizing dimensions of our life as created, redeemed, and sanctified by the Trinity. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit, often called the *pneuma*, chooses the *ecclesia* (the Church) as his Bride. This highest pneumatic-ecclesial dimension of our Christian personhood suggests that all of us in some way are handmaidens of the Lord. Our ministry leads to deepening surrender to him and a true change of heart.

1. Our *pneumatic dimension* makes us more receptive to the *inspirations* that come to us as gifts of the Holy Spirit, who lovingly outpours into our contemplative core the lights and insights that enable us to care enough to continue to offer generous and charitable service, even when the odds are stacked against us.
2. From our *transcendent dimension* comes the tendency of our heart to be formed by and to give form to *aspirations* for the "More Than." This dimension frees us to go more deeply into our eternal call in God and to go beyond whatever hampers its fulfillment in our admittedly still shallow hearts. Such transcendence enables us to turn idealistic pledges to pursue true ministerial excellence in Christ's name into realistic projects.
3. The dynamic strivings of our *functional dimension* prompt the arousal of wise and prudent Spirit-guided *ambitions*,