

By Sister Mary Diana Dreger, O.P., M.D.

Health for the Priest: Body and Soul

Those who seek to lead souls to Christ must remember that they too are incarnated souls

Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God. We must take reasonable care of them, taking into account the needs of others and the common good... (CCC, No. 2288).

This first article in the section of the Catechism of the Catholic Church entitled "Respect for health" identifies physical health as a gift from God. As any gift derives part of its value from the giver, our physical well-being is allotted significant importance. We cannot take lightly the worth of this gift, and the responsibility each of us has for it.

A priest's ordinary work at the service of the Church is dependent on his health. The aged or infirm priest can offer his prayers and sufferings as part of the communion of the saints. However, administration of the sacraments, teaching, and preaching are physically, emotionally, and intellectually demanding. To live the priestly life well, bodily health is essential.

Health problems interfere with a priest's work in various ways. A common difficulty might be a priest who is too tired to prepare his homilies well or offer the Sacrifice of the Mass with devotion. Less common would be the one who is disabled at a young age by potentially preventable illnesses. A priest has the responsibility to avoid problems that would limit living out the fullness of his vocation.

Obesity Epidemic

What is "reasonable care" of physical health? The basics include a balanced diet, regular exercise and adequate sleep. Our society is suffering from an epidemic of obesity and its related problems of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. The priest today is no less at risk; but his level of education, commitment to a life of virtue and position as a role model impart a higher degree of responsibility. Fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats, appropriate portion sizes, limited sugar and salt are the requirements for a healthy diet. Even one who necessarily frequents restaurants or fast-food establishments has the possibility of choosing healthier options.

Two-and-a-half hours per week of aerobic exercise is recommended. This does not necessitate membership in a gym; brisk, sustained walking outdoors is excellent for promoting cardiac, pulmonary and musculoskeletal health. The witness value to parishioners or even opportunity to engage in dialogue with others in this way may be significant. We all remember accounts of

Father Karol Wojtyla exercising body and soul during his camping trips with the youth of his parishes.

As for sleep, an average of eight hours of is still recommended; at least, a priest should recognize when inadequate rest is limiting his ability to pray and to serve his flock well.

Understanding the limitations of the human body is important in the practice of the virtues of humility and prudence.

Take Care

Appropriate medical care is also "reasonable." Acute, self-limiting illnesses (respiratory infections and "stomach bugs") can be treated with over-the-counter symptom relief, fluids and rest. In our society, a person may neglect his health for a time, and then when faced with a common illness, become demanding of the physician and his medical staff. Physicians frequently hear, "I don't have time to be sick!" from a patient who previously didn't find time to care for his health in the usual ways.

Demanding antibiotics when they are not indicated is not only bad for the individual's health, but goes against the "common good," contributing to rampant difficulties of antibiotic resistance. Inappropriately requesting expensive lab or radiologic testing again has potential harm for the patient and contributes to increasing medical and insurance costs.

More serious symptoms, those that limit usual activities, or those lasting for an extended time, should be evaluated by a medical professional. It is hard for a physician to get to know a patient for the first time during an illness; therefore, it is prudent to be established with a "primary care physician" when one is healthy.

The traditional "annual physical" is not necessary in all age groups; but certainly by age 50, a yearly "preventive care visit" is of benefit. Those with a chronic medical condition at any age should keep scheduled follow-up appointments and be active participants in their own care.

End-of-Life Care Decisions

In this day of ethical concerns in medicine, including those related to end-of-life care, every adult should have a designated Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care. This person would make health care decisions for an individual only when the patient is not capable of making his own decisions. This may or may not be a relative, but should be someone who is aware of the patient's personal and moral healthcare preferences.

"Reasonable care" of physical health incorporates concurrent care of emotional and psychological health. The sabbath rest of Sunday is limited by a priest's pastoral obligations. Nevertheless, he is no less called to honor the Lord's Day. Relaxing social interactions particularly with families is one way a priest can teach others how to spend Sunday in a holy and healthful way. No less should Sunday be a day for more focused prayer with the resurrected Lord, preparing the spirit for the activities of the week to come.

Emotional health plays a role in the well-being of the human person. Appropriate leisure activities are important in cultivating the many aspects of an individual's life. Reading, hobbies or participation in sports can develop particular gifts and provide relaxation of the mind and body.

The Stress/Health Connection

Every adult should understand the reality of stress and how it manifests itself in one's own life. The connection between stress and physical health is well understood. Not only should a priest be able to use this information in pastoral care of others, but he should recognize signs of stress in his own life, and use tools for managing it.

The Catechism recognizes that while lack of healthcare is one problem, at times there are those who make health itself a type of "god."

If morality requires respect for the life of the body, it does not make it an absolute value. It rejects a neo-pagan notion that tends to promote the cult of the body... (CCC, No. 2289).

Long hours spent in exercising or in competitive sports suggests a focus other than the supernatural. Unusual diets, food supplements, high-dose vitamins, or alternative medical treatments are expensive and counter a faith that values the use of intellectual reason.

Mistreatment of the body is addressed in another article of the Catechism:

The virtue of temperance disposes us to avoid every kind of excess: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco or medicine... (CCC, No. 2290).

The Basis of the Life of Virtue

Temperance and mortification are at the basis of the life of virtue. We can hardly hope to excel in a life of justice and charity if we have not first taken care of those problems which, when uncontrolled, lead us to selfishness. Further, as persons unified in body and soul, we cannot plan to grow in the spiritual life if we are weighed down by indulging the appetites of the body.

All know the danger of lung and other respiratory cancers due to smoking or tobacco use in any form. In fact, every system of the body is threatened by this highly addictive habit. It is not possible to justify smoking as beneficial to the person in any way. Numerous medical

opportunities exist to assist those who are already addicted. The priest must consider the witness he gives to others in continuing this habit, both in terms of health concerns and economic costs.

"Heavy drinking" is defined, for an adult male, as more than four alcoholic drinks at one occasion, or more than 14 drinks in one week. (One drink is defined as 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.) This level of alcohol consumption puts a man in danger of developing more serious alcohol problems.

Higher consumption of alcohol is a risk factor for serious liver disease. It increases the rates of various cancers, and contributes to high blood pressure and heart disease. Alcohol misuse commonly plays a role in motor vehicle and other types of accidents. A priest who drinks excessively will be limited in his apostolic work, not only because of direct results of intoxication, but because of the damaging witness he gives to the life of the priesthood.

The celibate life of the priest calls for the virtue of chastity, included under the cardinal virtue of temperance. It is not possible to practice a virtue in one aspect of our lives without its practice in all aspects of life. Intemperance in food or drink risks yielding to temptations in the area of chastity. In his book *Priests for the Third Millennium* (OSV, 2000), Archbishop Timothy Dolan recommends a "disciplined, balanced way of life," which he describes as

choreographing prayer, work, rest, recreation and friendship, with a disciplined approach to eating, drinking, spending money, buying new gadgets and entertainment. We used to call it an "ascetical" approach to life. Now we call it establishing a healthy rhythm of life (p. 318).

Attention to physical and emotional health is integrally related to our work and growth in the spiritual life. The priest, who with every believer is called to the heights of contemplation, must have at the basis of his spiritual life a strong foundation in asceticism. "Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God..." (CCC, No. 2288).

In its treatment of the fifth commandment, the Catechism of the Catholic Church includes appropriate care of physical health. In an age that tends to separate the material world from the spiritual, the body from the soul, the Church encourages us to remember instead the unity that exists in the human person.

Hence those who seek to lead souls to Christ must remember that they are incarnated souls, and care of the body is appropriate and necessary for those striving to follow the Word Incarnate. In teaching the fullness of our faith, the priest who promotes the dignity of the human person will necessarily be witnessing to proper care of physical health, not only in his words but by his example as well. TP

SISTER MARY DIANA, O.P., M.D., is a Dominican Sister of Saint Cecilia in Nashville, Tenn.

SECOND ARTICLE

By Roger J. Bourgea, S.M.

Daily Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament

Three reasons why I did not commit myself to this prayer for a long time

After reading the article written by Father Rawley Myers in *The Priest*, March 2009, "Pastoral Ministry is Fruitless Without Prayer," I felt a bit ashamed of the article I had submitted to *The Priest* which was printed in that same issue, about helping people to find their way through Boston. There is no comparison between his article and mine. Helping priests find their way to a greater commitment to God through a Holy Hour of prayer is far more important than helping people find their way through Boston.

Father Myers writes: "In these troubled times, to keep going and to do good, the priest must pray more than ever." "A priest cannot say his work is his prayer." "Without prayer the priest in the pulpit is just words." "The priest is the custodian of the Blessed Sacrament. Before the Blessed Sacrament he prays best." I believe this 100 percent, as I have experienced it in my own life. And I emphasized a sentence above because to me that is the most important point, prayer before the exposed Blessed Sacrament.

What a powerful article and how we need to hear these words over and over again! But I wonder, even if we hear these words over and over again, is that going to be enough to convince us that we need this Holy Hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament every day of our lives. I had often been told before about the importance of prayer in the life of a priest. As a young seminarian I heard Bishop Fulton Sheen preach many times about our need for a Holy Hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament every day. And I believed what I heard, but not enough to make me do what I said I believed.

I feel that there might still be a few priests out there who are having difficulty with this prayer. And so this article! I see three main reasons why I did not commit myself to this Holy Hour of prayer for such a long time in my life.

First, I thought I didn't have enough time for it. Second, I felt very uncomfortable just sitting there in silence before the Blessed Sacrament for any length of time. And third, I felt I really didn't need that extra hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament every day. But how wrong I was!

Finding the Time

Let's look first at the first reason. How can I find time enough to make a Holy Hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament every day, considering all the work I have to do in my ministry? The simple answer is: If I were really convinced that I needed this Holy Hour of prayer every day, I would find time for it, even though at times it would be very difficult on certain days.

For a long time the Holy Hour of prayer was not a top priority in my life. I said my Mass and I said my Breviary faithfully every day, and I thought that was enough. And seeing I had never regularly made this Holy Hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament before, I didn't realize how much good it could do for me in my life and in my ministry. But had I realized this before, even though I might have thought I didn't have the time for it, I would have rearranged my schedule a long time ago to make time for it.

Every now and then we pray Psalm 119 from the Breviary. In verses 147-148 we pray: "I rise before dawn and cry for help, I hope in your word." I have never been in a position before where I had to rise an hour earlier before dawn to be able to make this Holy Hour. I've always been able to make it before 9:00 a.m., before my mind got too clouded up or before things got too busy.

But knowing what I know now, even if I had to get up an hour earlier every morning to be able to make it, I would not hesitate to do it, I know for a fact that it would not take any energy away from me because of the hour of sleep I lost, but rather that it would give me more energy and confidence in my work as a priest.

Sitting in Silence

Now let's look at the second reason: not feeling very comfortable just sitting there in silence before the Blessed Sacrament for any length of time. Even though at times I felt I needed more prayer in my life, the Holy Hour was not the one I chose. In the past, whenever I did occasionally pray before the Blessed Sacrament for any length of time, I felt very fidgety and uncomfortable, very distracted. I couldn't focus. I didn't know what to do or what to say or how to listen in silence for any length of time, and so most of the time I ended up just reading a spiritual reading book.

Actually, I could have done that in my room on a more comfortable chair, and what difference would that have made? I can't remember ever being taught in the seminary how to pray in silence but I do remember being told that I must say prayers. If I had been taught how to really pray, I'm sure my life as a priest would have been very different. But that is all behind me now.

This problem of mine of not knowing how to focus in prayer for any length of time was solved for me when, back in 1980, I was given the opportunity to make a three-month renewal based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. It included a 30-day retreat, all in silence, even though we were some 30 people all making that same retreat together. What an experience! And what a

blessing! It was the best renewal I had ever made in my life and one that had lasting good effects.

Without Moving an Inch

Before starting the retreat, we were first taught how to sit comfortably, for an hour, without moving an inch, not even to scratch an itch. Don't move. Ignore it. It will go away. Don't let your body distract you. You can do it. To me that was essential if I was going to be able to focus on the meat of my prayer for any length of time.

The second thing we were taught was how to focus on our prayer without being too distracted. And that is where the importance of praying before the Blessed Sacrament, exposed, and with a crucifix standing nearby, came into my life. There I could focus visually on two most important aspects of Jesus' life which helped me to remain focused on my prayer.

Then we moved on to the meat of our prayer. We were told that there are many things we could use as meat for our prayer. We could use prayer mantras, repeating them slowly and audibly to ourselves, over and over again. Some people found this prayer very comforting. This brought a lot of inner peace and calm into their lives. And so it did in mine too, but only for a while. I needed something more concrete on which to place my focus for a longer period of time. And that I found in the Morning Prayer of the Breviary.

The Morning Prayer of the Breviary allows us to use the words of the prayers and the psalms to talk to God in a more direct way, and it also allows God to use these same prayers to talk to us in a more direct way. The psalms are so rich and so filled with all kinds of emotions and situations in the lives of those who wrote them that it is easy for us to make connection with some of them and use them for our own personal prayer.

But, before this could happen, we had to learn how to pray the psalms instead just how to say the psalms. It was suggested that one way of doing that was to pronounce the words of the prayers audibly to ourselves, to pray them more slowly and deliberately, line by line, stopping after every line that speaks to us in order to let it sink in; repeating it over and over again; listening to what it said to us and making it our own, knowing that there is no rush, that we have a whole hour ahead of us to allow God to communicate with us more meaningfully.

Normally, in the past, it would take me 10 to 15 minutes to say the Morning Prayer. But by praying it, it could easily take me 40 minutes. This is certainly different than the way I had been saying the Breviary for the past 45 years of my life as a priest. No wonder I wasn't getting anywhere. No wonder it wasn't having any effect in my life.

I Needed to be Convinced

But even with all of that help I had been given with prayer, it still wasn't enough to convince me that I needed a Holy Hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament daily. It took a crisis in my life to convince me of that. And that happened about five years ago, after 45 years as a priest.

At that time, for about three months, I was going through hell. When you half consider jumping off a roof, you know it's time to let God take hold of your life. Some of you know exactly what I am talking about. I'm sure you have suffered the same experience in your life.

It was not that I was a bad priest. It was just that I found myself very weak. I was being torn apart. I tried to do my best, but it was not enough. It was then that the words of Bishop Sheen came back into my life. And what a blessing!

I could never have gotten through that period of my life had I not decided to place myself before the Blessed Sacrament every morning for an hour. There I felt the warmth and power of God's love change and energize me. There I felt the inner peace and strength that I needed so badly. I needed to sit before Him for a period of time every day in order to hear Him speak to me.

Sit Facing the Son

Somebody once said: "If you sit facing the sun for any length of time, something is going to happen to you, outside and inside. The energy and the heat of the sun are going to change you." So too, if you sit daily before the Son of God, present in the exposed Blessed Sacrament for any length of time, something is going to happen to you, inside and outside.

The love and the peace of God are going to so greatly energize and revitalize you that you are going to be transformed, and then start to feel and behave in a totally different manner. And that is exactly what happened to me.

It was not long after I started making my daily Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament, with a crucifix standing nearby, that all of a sudden, overnight, I felt a great relief and freedom in my life. And it came about all of a sudden, overnight, and that's what surprised and shocked me so much.

When you know that for weeks you have been unable to forgive or even to speak to someone whom you felt had done you a great injustice, and then all of a sudden you wake up one morning and without any warning you approach and speak to that person as though nothing had happened, you have to believe that there is a Power who has helped you climb that hurdle.

Now I am convinced that if you sit and chat with a real friend every morning for an hour, especially if that friend is Jesus, instead of just saying 'Hi!' to Him as you pass by, something is bound to happen to you. Your relationship with Him is going to turn you inside out. It is going to not only affect how you feel, but also how you think and how you act. I am positive that the daily Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament is the solution for 99.9 percent of our problems.

Now I am allowing God to direct my life more than I have in the past, and I love it. I feel this in my prayer and in my ministry. I now feel calmer and more relaxed, more at peace with myself and less under pressure. I have more energy and patience with myself and with others than before.

I also feel more resigned to what Jesus wants of me in my life. I often tell Him: "Use me as You will." And I mean it. I trust Him. I know He will give me all the power and strength I need. I now feel freer from the worries and anxieties I had in my life before. One might say that it's because I have nothing to worry about right now; everything seems to be going my way.

And That Is a Gift

That is true, as I am in very good health and love my ministry as hospital chaplain. But I know it is because God has taught me to accept with joy, and without complaining, those difficult things in my life that I cannot change. And that is a gift.

I also experienced a dramatic change in my whole prayer life. I now feel convinced that I need Jesus in my life and my ministry more than ever before. I now find myself speaking with Him very often during the day, something I had not done so frequently before, except to say my Breviary, my Mass and my Rosary.

I now look forward to spending at least 15 minutes with Him before the Blessed Sacrament every time I prepare to celebrate Mass in public where I will be preaching, in order to put a finishing touch to the preparation of my homily. And I find that it helps me a lot. I never felt the need or desire to do that before. Why? What changed me?

I also find myself speaking to Jesus before I start my rounds to the patients in the hospital. I find myself praying in the elevator, asking God to give me strength and to lead me to those patients who need me. And He does that. But I had never done that before, even though I was a hospital chaplain for more than 25 years of my priesthood.

'I Was Just Thinking of You'

Before, I was more businesslike, in my ministry, visiting those patients whom I thought needed me and letting the rest go. But since I started praying like this, it is not unusual that God does

lead me to those patients who need me. I find patients telling me as I enter their room: "Gee, Father, I was just thinking of you. I was hoping a priest would visit because I have something I want to talk to you about."

And He leads me not only to patients, but also to many of the medical staff members, hospital workers and visitors who also need my attention but to whom I had never given much notice. I feel great about this opportunity to be of service.

Finally, I feel His effect in my life as a priest. Ever since I turned 70 I had been telling Jesus in my prayer that, if ever He wanted to take me away from this world in a jiffy, that would be perfectly OK with me. But now I don't feel that way. Not because I am afraid of death, but because I have come to love my life and appreciate my ministry more.

I think that I have something to offer. I enjoy visiting the patients very much. I find fulfillment in helping them to trust in Jesus the way He taught me to trust in Him. I find great satisfaction in that. I would love it if God gave me another 20 years in this ministry. I never felt like this before. Why? What changed me?

All these are terrific changes in my life, even though you might think they are small and insignificant. And I am sure they have come about because of the daily Holy Hour I spend before the Blessed Sacrament. There is no other explanation for it. During those times before Him, Jesus actively convinced me of certain truths in my life that I had known only superficially before, and that has made all the difference in my life. I'm sure I still have a long way to go, but I am also sure that I'm on the right track with my daily Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament.

It took a catastrophe in my life to wake me up. Don't wait for a catastrophe in your life to wake you up to make you realize your need for a daily Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament. Or better still, if you don't think you could make up your mind by yourself to do the daily Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament, why don't you ask God to give you a real trauma in your life that will force you to do it?

It would be worth it if it brings you to experience that inner peace, calm, security and happiness in your life that comes from praying that way every morning. You prove your love for Jesus by spending more time with Him every day, and He will prove His love for you by the calm and peace He gives you in your life and in your ministry.

I had to come to the realization that all I was doing by myself before was not enough. I tried my best, but it wasn't enough. I needed a greater power on which to build.

I urge you, if you are not doing it already, to try it out. And, if you need a period of time for a renewal to teach you how to pray in silence and to be comfortable for an hour before the Blessed

Sacrament, that's understandable. Ask your bishop or your provincial if you can go on a Renewal Program that deals with this. I'm sure that they will be very happy to do that for you because, not only will help you, but also it will be a help to the diocese or community in which you live. TP

FATHER BOURGEA, S.M., ordained in 1959, is a member of the Marist Fathers. He spent 29 years as a missionary in Papua New Guinea and Fiji. He is now involved with hospital chaplaincy in the Boston area.