

PASTOR TO PASTOR

LENT 2007

A quarterly newsletter from The Orthodox Church in America's Department of Pastoral Life & Ministry

Glory to Jesus Christ!



It is possible for pastors to feel 'religious' or 'spiritual' or even 'holy' and yet to be very far from God and neighbor. Who knows what hidden emotional or psychological needs might be expressed in identifying our own subjective feelings with what is truly God pleasing worship and pastoral ministry? It is so very easy to get these things wrong. Our feelings are tricky things. Most of us will have had the experience of feeling that we have accomplished something wonderful - only to discover that

we've made a shambles of it. On the other hand, surely every pastor has at some time felt his efforts to have been poor and useless - only to find that the Lord has actually blessed others through them. If our own spiritual life demands the regular therapy of Confession, our vocation as pastors probably demands an ongoing conversation with other pastors to navigate the dangerous currents and eddies of our subjectivity. I think that this is especially true in Lent when, perhaps because of the intensity of the season, there often appears to be a raw edge in our interpersonal relations, as if a malevolent force were interfering with our ability to communicate sanely, let alone sympathetically, with one another. In our family we refer to the 'lenten imp' - it uses every opportunity to trip up harmony and spiritual growth in parish and family life. Orthodox internet users have discovered this Lenten touchiness too. Some sign off until after Pascha to

avoid temptation, like monks leaving a monastery until Holy Week. For parish priests, however, there is no escape from the interactions that can render us vulnerable to off-base thoughts and feelings. What a tremendous consolation the brotherhood of the clergy is at these times - where it exists in a healthy manner - and what a saving grace it is to yield our delusions to the good-will and objectivity of others.

Let us pray for one another.

Handwritten signature of Archpriest Andrew Morbey.

Archpriest Andrew Morbey
Department of Pastoral Life and Ministry

A PRIEST AND AN ALCOHOLIC

By A Priest of the OCA

I am an OCA priest. Several times a week, however, I attend meetings of a special organization. There I identify myself with their traditional formula, "My name is _____, and I'm an alcoholic."

The program that I participate in is Alcoholics Anonymous. The name is no doubt familiar to everyone. However, few probably know much about the organization or its famous "Twelve Steps." Just a few years ago, I myself had only a cursory acquaintance with AA, gained mostly through contact with members over the years. However, I knew enough to respect the work they did. I knew it had helped people regain control of their lives.

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I would like to talk a little bit about AA, “to share my experience, strength and hope” (to use AA jargon). Although some may guess who I am, I do not choose to reveal my identity. Partly this is because of AA’s own principle of anonymity, which means that it is an individual’s privilege to reveal that he is an alcoholic or a member of the group. The anonymity principle also means that nothing I say can be considered official AA material or “doctrine”. AA has no official spokesmen except the collective “group conscience” expressed in certain specific ways. What you read here is purely my personal observations and opinions as a recovering alcoholic who has participated in the program.

Last year Alcoholics Anonymous marked seventy years of existence. It began in 1935 with a conversation between two men in Akron, Ohio. Bill W., a New York stock broker in Akron on business, had seen drinking destroy his career. By the time he got to Ohio, he had been sober for five months as the result of a “spiritual experience” and was trying to rebuild his life. Dr. Bob S. was a local physician watching his practice fall apart because of chronic drunkenness and drug abuse. Both men would have been classified as hopeless alcoholics. The two met because Bill had an idea he wanted to test. He believed that a few simple spiritual principles coupled with talking with and helping another drunk get straight would aid an alcoholic in maintaining his own sobriety. He also believed that only a recovering alcoholic could speak to another drunk with the necessary authenticity and insight to get his fellow sufferer clean.

A month after that first conversation Dr Bob took his last drink. The two men began working with others and eventually formed a very loosely-organized society. In 1939 the group published a book called *Alcoholics Anonymous*, containing their collective experience in getting “incurable” drunks sober and keeping them that way. The book is still the handbook of the organization, affectionately called “The Big Book” (AAs sometimes refer to the Bible as “The Big Big Book”).

Alcoholism is a disease, recognized as such by the American Medical Association since the 1950s. A psychiatrist involved in the founding of AA likened it to an allergy, that is, the body’s abnormal reaction to a substance. The Big Book calls it a physical allergy coupled with a mental obsession. Four things qualify alcoholism as a disease by medical definition: (1) it is at least in part physical; (2) it is chronic; (3) it is progressive; and (4) if untreated it is fatal.

Certainly there is a psychological and spiritual component in the affliction. But it also has a physical dimension. The body of an alcoholic does not process alcohol like that of a normal person. Moreover, as the disease progresses, changes occur in the metabolism which increase the physical dependency. In addition, heavy use of alcohol or any other mood-altering substance changes the chemistry of the brain in ways that are still little understood.

From personal experience I can affirm this dependency. From my first drink, when I was 17 years old, I drank “alcoholically.” In other words, if I drank I either did not stop until I was drunk, or I was left with a powerful craving which begged to be satisfied. In the earliest days of my marriage and priesthood, I could keep this urge in check and refrain from drinking for months at a time. But I could maintain control only through abstinence; another drink set off the craving and frequently would lead to intoxication. I might not drink for a long period of time, but on the occasions when I did drink, I had no real control. Alcohol was always there, like a devoted wife waiting for me to come back to it. And over the years the craving grew.

Along with the physical craving the mental obsession also increased. I warned other priests about the dangers of “burnout”, but I did not heed my own warnings. The disease preys upon any weakness it can find, especially stress. Stress can come from many sources. Not all are negative. Success can bring as much pressure as failure. In my case it was not difficulties, problems or controversies but good things in the parish (growth, new projects, more opportunities for rewarding service) that produced stress. I did not deal with it well. Prayer and my personal spiritual life, instead of helping, became another source of stress, a part of the routine, something else on the “to do” list. I did not take vacations: “there’s too much to do and I can’t afford to take the time and there isn’t really enough money.” I also felt a certain sense of isolation or alienation.

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This feeling was an old one, going back to childhood. But, as psychologists have noticed, being a clergyman also produces an isolation of its own due to difficulties of having close friendships in the parish, rivalries or jealousies with fellow clergy, the heightened sense of responsibility, attitudes and expectations of others both inside and outside our congregations, etc. More and more all these things mounted up. More and more my release became drinking.

The two things together, the physical craving and the spiritual disconnection, led finally to alcoholism. Fortunately I was finally forced into “a moment of clarity”, as it is called in AA. I had to confront my psychological and spiritual deterioration and recognize that its cause was alcoholism. Fortunately I had people to guide me to the solution. My wife and children expressed unqualified support for whatever I needed to do. My wife was also “supportive” through her actions: she literally poured out every drop of alcohol in the house. My bishop and the OCA chancery directed me to a Twelve-Step-based residential rehab program. I had Orthodox friends involved in AA. One was a layman in my parish with several years of sobriety. He took me to meetings and kept me sober the last week before rehab (when I really, really “needed” a drink). Another friend was an Orthodox monk with decades of sobriety. I did not contact him, but I knew his story, and his recovery inspired the hope that I too could recover.

My recovery has been difficult physically, mentally and spiritually. I suffered nightmares and sleepless nights, acute abnormalities in my blood pressure, severe depression bordering on total despair, short-term memory loss and aphasia. But God is merciful. I am in recovery. As the fog of alcohol clears my spiritual life also becomes more healthy. Many parts of Orthodox spirituality have taken on deeper meaning for me. I took St. John's *Ladder* with me to rehab and found a new appreciation for that classic book, the original “step program”. One day I suddenly recalled a story from *The Way of a Pilgrim* (a book I had not read since seminary), about an army officer who recovered from alcohol addiction by reading the Gospels. I looked the passage up, and I reread it often now. I truly understand the story for the first time, and I see in it many parallels to the AA program. As a man in my group likes to say, “Drunk or sober, we're all doing the same thing in different ways.”

The AA program dried me out and enabled me, in a sense, to come back to the Church. Certainly AA has not replaced the Church and her Mysteries in my spiritual life. Nothing can replace the grace that Christ has poured into me through the fellowship of His Body. But I believe He also worked through AA to help me find the Church and her life again when I was in danger of losing them. God moves in mysterious ways, we are told, and He certainly has in the life of this unworthy priest. AA helped rescue my life in this world; the Orthodox Faith will, I know, bring me safely into the life of the world to come – but in both cases to God belongs the glory!

In closing I would like to offer my help to any of the brethren out there who might benefit. The first way is to encourage you to become more aware of alcoholism and other addictions and how to handle them pastorally. Get acquainted with the AA program and how to refer people to it. Get a copy of the Big Book and read at least the first 200 or so pages, the outline of the program. AA has “open meetings” which non-alcoholics may attend. Go to a few and get to know the program as it actually exists in your area. If you have a parishioner who goes into the AA program, give them all the encouragement you can to stick with it and follow it rigorously. Insist that he or she get an AA sponsor and yourself establish contact with and give the sponsor your support. You might also get in contact with a local Al-Anon chapter. This is an organization founded by the Lois W., wife of AA cofounder Bill W., to serve the families of alcoholics. Al-Anon will give you pastoral insights into the disease and will also provide you with an invaluable resource as you help the alcoholic's family cope with its effects.

Do all things in love. Let Matthew 12:20 be your guide. Try not to lecture or badger the person. Especially do not appeal to their “will-power” or accuse them of lack of commitment to sobriety. Alcoholism is a disease. Telling an alcoholic he could stop drinking “if he really wanted to” is like telling a cancer patient “if you really wanted to you'd stop that tumor from growing.” Alcoholics do not drink because they want to or because they are weak-willed. It is a wry joke in AA that we actually have an extremely strong will – it will keep us drinking when everything else in our very being cries out for us to stop. Every alcoholic, deep inside, wants to stop drinking. He just doesn't know how.

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Become aware also of other forms of addiction. Some of the physical aspects vary, but all addictions are essentially the same. In fact, the emerging medical specialization of addictionology recognizes something called "cross-addiction". This means that someone addicted to one substance is in reality addicted to all mood-altering substances. Using one, even if not the person's original drug of choice, will lead to use of the others. For example, I abused only alcohol. However, I cannot now take any addictive drugs: I am "cross-addicted" to them. If I use them, even under a doctor's prescription, I will be hooked on them at the same level at which I was hooked on alcohol. I will need to be treated as if I had "gone back out", that is, had started using alcohol again. And in fact, if I took Xanax, for example, on doctor's prescription, I would very quickly begin abusing it and also go back to alcoholic drinking.

Another thing that pastors must be aware of is alluded to above. Alcohol has long been recognized as a "problem" substance. Likewise the "street drugs" such as cocaine, heroin, etc. As pastors we would immediately consider a parishioner suffering from these addictions as someone in need of help. There is another addiction, however, equally serious, the abuse of prescription medications. The after-care group from my rehab has about twenty people regularly attending. Three or four of us are pure alcoholics, three or four more used "street drugs"; the rest abused medications prescribed for them by physicians. Vicodin, Xanax, OxyContin, the benzodiazepines – all of these are as liable to abuse as alcohol or cocaine, but neither the threat they pose nor the reality that many are addicted to them is readily recognized or admitted, even by physicians. This problem, however, is one we must be aware of as priests, as husbands and fathers, as men ourselves subject to weaknesses of the flesh.

This leads to one final note: Key to the AA program – and to the Gospel – is the principle of sharing the message. "Twelfth Step work" – helping someone else get and stay sober – is the best way for me to ensure my continued sobriety. An e-mail address where I can be contacted is recoveringpriest@yahoo.com. If you have a parishioner who has a problem with alcohol or some other substance and you would like some help dealing with them, please contact me. If you have a family member whom you fear has a problem, please contact me. But especially, if you think you yourself may have a problem with alcohol or some other substance, please contact me. I will consider all communications as covered by the confidentiality of Confession.

And just remember, I've been through it too.

Update on the OCA's 2007 Seminary Internship Program

Five seminarians from St Tikhon's Seminary and 2 from St Vladimir's Seminary are in the process of being matched up with parishes for the 2007 Summer Intern Program. At the moment, mentors and sponsoring parishes identified in early February are being contacted to confirm their commitment to the program. As soon as confirmations are received, the listing of seminarians and proposed parishes will be forwarded to Metropolitan Herman for his blessing.

The proposed dates for the program are June 3 - August 19. It is anticipated that some form of orientation program for mentors will take place in late April. It is worthwhile to note that funding for the Seminary Internship Program is firmly in place and that the program is recognized within the church administration as an important contribution to the pastoral formation of those in our seminaries.

Scenes From Our Church Life

An interview with Archpriest Vladimir Lecko, St Andrew Mission, Minocqua, WI



P2P: *When, where and by who were you ordained?*

I was ordained to the Diaconate on October 11, 1969 at the Holy Trinity Church, Randolph, N. J. and to the Priesthood on October 12, 1969 at St. John the Baptist Church, Alpha, N.J. by His Beatitude, Metropolitan Ireney.

P2P: *Where did you receive your pastoral and theological formation?*

I received my theological formation at St. Tikhon's Seminary.

P2P: *Could you mention a priest or priests who inspired or otherwise encouraged you to think about priestly ministry?*

I was born in Terryville, CT. Our home was located two doors from Sts. Cyril & Methodius Orthodox Church. Our family was very active in the parish at that time. Interaction with the Priest and his family was almost a daily occurrence. As a result, I have very strong memories of the Priests that were rectors of the parish during the first 21 years of my life. The three that stand out most vividly in my memories are Fr. John Semanitsky, Fr. Andrew Skripnik-Kuharsky and Fr. Joseph Federonko.

As I look back at my formative years, I realize how much they contributed by example to my spiritual formation, growth and conviction to remain an Orthodox Christian for life. All of the latter were put to the test during my nine years in the United States Air Force (during the Korean War and after it). For the first seven years I had no Orthodox Chaplain or an Orthodox parish near the Air Force Bases where I was stationed. As a result, I was constantly being proselytized by fellow GIs who were members of various Protestant denominations, Mormons, and any other group (or cult) that one can think of. When I returned to 'the states' from overseas (in my eighth year) I encountered my first Orthodox Chaplain, Fr. Basil Stroyen. Father literally 'took me under his wing' and with the aid of his extensive library helped me through a systematic course of study in Orthodoxy on an adult level that addressed the many questions that I had developed as a result of the constant 'bombardment' by the 'proselytizers'. He and his Matushka (Nina) also helped my wife, Virginia, prepare for Chrismation and he eventually Chrismated both her and our then infant son, Peter. His mentoring and encouragement were the major contributions to my ultimate decision to enter the Seminary in preparation for priestly ministry.

P2P: *What communities have you served in?*

My first parish assignment was The Nativity of the Virgin Mary Eastern Orthodox Church in Madison, Illinois. While there, I eventually became the Dean of the St. Louis Deanery. I was assigned to St. Mary's Cathedral in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1979 and served there until my retirement in 1996. During a portion of that time I served as the Dean of the Minneapolis Deanery.

P2P: *You have always had an excellent rapport with young people. How do you think pastors best serve the needs of parish youth.*

Success in working with children, junior high level and senior high level students over the years was pretty much determined by how they were approached initially. I found that to "meet them where they are with open arms and open heart" proved effective. Children and youth can very quickly perceive whether you genuinely love them or not. Continuous personal contact and interaction with them over time helps to assure them that love, compassion and genuine personal interest in how they are, what they are learning, what they are doing and to what they aspire are "always there" for them.

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Solid relationships provide great opportunities for establishing good rapport that encourages open, honest, serious discussions about God, church, life, whatever. These discussions help young people find answers to the sensitive questions that loom large in their lives.

In the real estate business there is the slogan, “Location! Location! Location!” For us as Pastors, I suggest the slogan, “Example! Example! Example!” I constantly remind myself of the ‘old saying’ that says, “Children [and youth] listen 10% and watch 90%”.

P2P: *Education and cultural activities have always been strong interests of yours. What are some of your best memories involving opening up the possibilities of a wider cultural life in parishes?*

Memories of children’s choirs and instrumental groups are the most vivid of all. Today children are so involved in secular after school activities that to develop church related activities to attract them and get them involved and to ‘hold them’ is a challenge. What may have ‘worked’ when I was involved ‘full time’ on a parish may not ‘work’ in today’s hectic life-style. Having said that, there are things to be considered before embarking on cultural activities, be they ethnic or artistic, many things that are done or accomplished in and around a parish are done by volunteers. Thank God for volunteers! However, there are the volunteers that are well-intentioned but either lack authentic preparation in whatever they are volunteering for or perhaps have problems in communicating with others (especially children). Short attention spans and great emphasis on the value of time govern whether children and/or adults will stay with a program that has any of the aforementioned negative characteristics. One of my most cherished memories regarding cultural activities within a parish comes from my experience at my first parish assignment. A Mr. James Chernoff who was a Kuban Cossack and was in his eighties when I arrived, was the instructor for a Russian Folk Dance group made up of children of the parish. He loved children very much. He was able to communicate this to the children of the parish (despite his heavy Russian accent and limited English language skills) and they in turn loved him very much. He still was able to demonstrate the rigorous dance steps that the dances required at his age. They ‘knocked themselves out’ to imitate him and to please him. It proves that with sincere, mutual love involved, age is not always a barrier between generations.

The parish is located in the Metropolitan St. Louis area and the area boasted an International Folklore Federation in its midst. Within this organization were members of approximately thirty ethnic groups. Most groups had both adult and youth groups that performed the dances, sang or played authentic folk instruments of its respective heritage. Our parish had the above dance group and a balalaika orchestra that were members of the Federation and were very actively involved in its public performances. The interaction with the other groups helped our parish groups appreciate their own heritage and gave them a sense of pride in it. After public performances, people would come up and ask about our parish and the Orthodox Church. For some of the latter, it was the first time that they ever heard of the Orthodox Church. The entire parish supported these cultural activities of its youth. What was great was that all the members of the dance group and orchestra were actively involved in the life and ministry of the parish; the girls sang in the choir and the boys were Altar Boys or in the choir. Solid relationships that last a life time are formed in groups like this and develop into a support group(s) in later life as well as during the ‘growing years’.

P2P: *What is your musical background? Do you have any reflections to offer on music and worship? Music and community life? Music and prayer?*

Music was an important part of our family life. My father was a chanter at our church, my mother sang ‘with the congregation’, my older sister and my older brothers sang in the choir. We sang a lot at home. Mostly we sang hymns from the services of the church. My mother had a very pleasant soprano voice and would usually be the one to start to sing and then everyone would join in. My brothers and I were taught to play musical instruments by private teachers. Eventually we had a ‘family band’ that began playing at various ethnic functions (weddings, Baptisms, dances, etc.).

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