



Church Burnout

The story goes that [Teresa of Avila](#) (1515-1582), the great Roman Catholic saint, was complaining to God after once again being kicked out of another Spanish town by yet another bishop who did not appreciate her reforming spirit. As she sat on her suitcases she prayed aloud, “Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them!”

This may be apocryphal but I like it. In my job as chancellor of the [Orthodox Church in America](#) I see plenty of alienated, burnt out believers—clergy and laity—who have had to endure too many years of church fights and disappointments. But what is more surprising is how many people have come through these dark periods and have picked up the torch to faithfully follow Christ and serve in His Church. In every case when someone turns the corner and discovers new life in the church, it is because they have decided that God still dwells here. As an Amy Grant song puts it, “I have decided I’m gonna live like a believer, turn my back on the deceiver and live what I believe.”



Church life from the beginning has been plagued by internal tensions, quarreling and public fights that demoralize its members and undermine its mission. Just read St Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and you get some sense of the troubles *he* faced. Factionalism. Social cliques. People taking sides and magnifying their petty liturgical and theological disputes. Sexual misconduct. Overblown parish pride. Big talkers who didn’t deliver. Indifference to people in need. Disputes over Paul’s teaching and authority. And that was around 50 AD in a Christian community that was probably no more than fifty people!

Even the saints sometimes have trouble getting along. St Paul and St Barnabas had to split up their mission and go in different directions after “a sharp contention” when they couldn’t agree on taking young John Mark with them ([Acts 15:36-41](#)). Two different leadership styles collided. John Mark had failed the mission before when he left prematurely to go home ([Acts 13:13](#)) and St Paul, focusing on the mission’s



objectives, was unwilling to have a weak link who couldn't do the work. St Barnabas may have given more importance to the long-term relationship and mentoring the young man. Whatever the issue, it was enough for the two saints to get really mad at each other, at least for a time. This dispute was surely distressing for everyone else too, but they took it in stride as just part of normal human life, even among Christians. So both were "commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord" (Acts 15:40) as they went their separate ways to proclaim the word of the Lord and strengthen the brethren.

We find this pattern repeated from century to century, from culture to culture "wherever two or three are gathered." There are always plenty of legitimate reasons that a faithful Christian would just get tired of the mess, throw up his hands and walk away. Or try to find some other religious community where "it's not like that." Good luck. Quakers are known to specialize in being peacemakers, but their own communities are not immune to disputes as I've learned from Quaker friends (to their credit they have well-developed procedures for dealing with congregational conflicts, and we Orthodox could learn from them). Buddhism too is reputed to be a conflict-free zone, but when I recently attended a training seminar for church leaders on handling sexual misconduct, two Buddhist nuns were there as well, because one of their male leaders had stepped over the line and in the aftermath the community had been devastated and divided.

Burnout may be what the classic spiritual writers call "acedia," despondency, despair, restlessness, no longer caring about anything or anyone, feeling nothing during prayer, not wanting to pray, a sense of hopelessness, that there is no purpose in our life and no way out. The spiritual teachers of the ancient church advised fighting this "demon of despondency" with psalms, a firm hope in future blessings and sticking to a routine of regular work. The cure may not be especially complicated. We may need someone just to listen to us and acknowledge our sense of overwork, betrayal or hurt. We may need just a dose of being human. A priest I know once went to the great monastic center on Mt Athos in Greece and was speaking with an elderly monk about being in such a state. After listening to his woes the monk went to a cupboard and brought out a box of chocolates. "Here, I think you need these. And you need a rest. Take your wife on a vacation." This is similar to the advice St Thomas Aquinas gave in the 13th century: a hot bath, a glass of wine and a good night's sleep.

We also need to be aware that what we may label as burnout may in fact be clinical depression. When we are "feeling blue," especially over a long period of time, we may think we are merely suffering the slings and arrows of normal life, including normal church life. But we may have a serious ailment that needs medical attention as well as spiritual counsel.

How do we minister to someone who has gone past the burnout post, and left the church? I'm ashamed to say that there are people who have quietly stopped coming to church and I just didn't follow up. I got caught in day-to-day busy-ness and they fell to the bottom of the to-do list. Parishes can get everyone involved to follow up and prevent this scenario, but it happens and it's sad. Not everyone with burnout will be open to a visit or a conversation, but most are. Sometimes the burnout comes from a genuine crisis of faith. Perhaps they haven't had a chance to talk about their troubles seriously, or they were afraid of talking about it. Maybe they don't have the words they need to have this sort of conversation. Or they're afraid of being pushed into a corner. We need to share our own uncertainties and disappointments, but also why we stay in the face of them. Or perhaps they drift away because competing demands keep them from an active spiritual life, and "as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature" (Luke 8:14). Others may feel lonely and no one in the church notices. For them it's not so much a crisis of faith as a crisis of love. Sometimes they leave because they



became so active in church life that important aspects of their family life got neglected (a priest recently told me that priests regularly break the Ten Commandments because they *steal*: they steal from the time that belongs to their wife and children).

It is guaranteed that we will face situations in church that will push all our burnout buttons. The question is, will we be a torchbearer or a burned-out leaver? Maybe we'll be both, leaving for a time, and then coming back after discovering—or rediscovering—that there is a lot more in the life of the church than meets the eye. “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

Further Reading

An excellent reflection on this whole subject is Kathleen Norris, [Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks and a Writer's Life](#) (2008). See also Fr Gabriel Bunge, [Despondency: the Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus](#), (SVS Press, 2011).

Source: [The official blog of the Department of Youth, Young Adult, and Campus Ministries of the Orthodox Church in America.](#)