

Compassion fatigue
Parish Diary
August 31, 2012
Fr. Peter Daly

Every day brings a new parade of mental illness to our door.

We see schizophrenia, manic-depression, schitzo-affective disorder, major depression, drug addiction, and just plain craziness. They come by phone, by car, by foot, by bicycle, and by e-mail.

Here they come with all their troubles. They dump them at our door step and say, “fix it.” The problem is that much of the time we can’t “fix it.”

One lady calls here half a dozen times per day. She calls me “father”, but she treats me like an ATM. We have solved her problems so often in the past, that she thinks we should respond to her every need. She calls us when she runs out of gas or needs rent money or laundry soap or food or even cigarettes. Like most mentally ill people, she thinks that her problem is urgent and that no problem could possibly be more urgent.

One recent Sunday I had a bishop visiting from Africa. She approached us on our way to 8 AM mass. “Father,” she said, “I need toilet paper.” I couldn’t leave the bishop, so I said, “OK, go to the back door of the rectory and take toilet paper from the downstairs bathroom.”

Later that day I was using that bathroom. Just at the moment of my greatest need I reached for the toilet paper to discover she had CLEANED ME OUT! Now that is going too far!

Scott Peck, MD, the famous psychiatrist and author of “The Road Less Traveled”, said that the common feature of all mental illness is narcissism, an obsession with self.

They think the world revolves around them. They think that everybody is talking about them or conspiring against them. They think that their problem must be dealt with right now!

Mentally ill people are not organized. They can’t keep appointments. They don’t follow directions. They don’t take their medication properly.

They are a hard group to help but they really do need help. They need it more than most people.

Not every rectory gets such a parade of people in need. Some rectories are so isolated or so insulated that nobody can find them or get into them. But our parish is on Main Street, in a small town. We are sandwiched between the homeless shelter and the police station. The department of social services and the court house are a block away. The bus stop is out in front. We are convenient!

We try to be of help. On our campus we have a food pantry, a community outreach office, a counseling office, and a social worker. We help with food, rent, utilities, medicine and emergencies. During the winter we run a program for the homeless who overflow the shelter. Every week our food pantry gives out food to 100 families.

Still, it never seems to be enough. Sometimes we must say no. Sometimes people get angry or violent. One man recently started shouting at me, “People said you care. You don’t care.” That really hurts.

What to do?

There really isn’t anything to do, except to continue helping, as long and as much as we can. But we have to recognize that we can’t solve every problem. They are so troubled, that only God can soothe their troubled minds. Sometimes praying with them or for them is the best help.

After 25 years of parish ministry, I am under no illusions. The flow will never dry up. The only solution to “compassion fatigue” is prayer and rest. Then start again.

The Lord told the truth when he said, “The poor you have always with you.”