



PASTORAL ISSUES AND ADVANCE CARE PLANNING

by Fr Steven Voytovich

Tony had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and in treatment for several years now, and had fought hard. Although he had been blessed with a period of remission, now he found himself in a seeming non-ending cycle. He received his dose of chemotherapy with a chaser of steroids to repeatedly pump his body into action against the cancer cells. After the chemotherapy effects wore off he was taken off prednisone, and spent a whole day sitting in the living room in his chair too depressed to take an interest in much of anything. He knew the treatment was having little effect, but was loath to acknowledge it. Tony found himself getting more anxious with each cycle, yet he wasn't sure why. Finally he began to face the reality of his death. The greatest concern at this point (he felt it had to be the reason for the increasing anxiety) was about end-of-life arrangements.

He thought long and hard. Tony was living in an urban area and attended a large Orthodox parish. His roots and the very core of his existence

lay, however, in the small rural parish near the family dairy farm where he had grown up. He wanted to be buried next to the little church. But he was sure that his wife of 25 years would want to be buried in town from the large parish where they were active members. He had no idea that she was agonizing over the same questions. Both were sure the other would want different arrangements, and neither would bring it up.

One day when the family was all at home, Tony finally broke the ice and said that he had some concerns that he wanted to talk about. In the struggle even to begin the conversation, it was decided that the parish priest should be invited over to help facilitate this family discussion. Such family discussions were not a regular part of this family's life.

Fr. Vladimir arrived and everyone sat down together. After drawing in a long breath, Tony began to lay out his concerns about not wanting to be artificially kept alive if there was no hope in his terminal condition, and final arrangements. He didn't want his family to be agonizing over these

things at the time of death. Tony carefully watched his wife as he began to address funeral arrangements. She began to smile as he finished. It turned out that she was in agreement with her husband and also wanted him to be buried at the small parish where he grew up. The sigh of relief from both was overwhelming, as they had been privately agonizing over this for so long. With great attention to detail, all the arrangements were worked out with the family present. These were in turn shared with the funeral director. This moment of peace and calm returned after his death, as the advanced care plan was carried out.

The above example of advanced care planning concerns my own father who died eleven years ago. Besides helping us at the critical juncture above, Fr. Vladimir and others from our parish were with us through all of the difficult days of his last hospitalization, and arranged for the celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Unction at his bedside and funeral services. Now I am in a hospital setting as an institutional chaplain, the pastor of a newly established mission parish, and carry with me the many lessons learned from this experience as well as from others I have sojourned with.

Most pastors are likely aware that the Patient Self Determination Act requires that all patients coming into hospitals receiving Medicare and Medicaid funds must be given Advance Directive forms. Patients can identify surrogate decision-makers and state their wishes regarding treatment when they are unable to express them. This was covered in a recently published article in the Resource Handbook entitled, "Health

(over)

Pastoral Conference 2001

Readers of "Pastors to Pastors" are urged to set aside a few days of the first week of June, 2001. The Pastoral Life Ministries Unit of the Orthodox Church in America is in the process of planning another "Pastoral Ministries Conference." This will be similar to the previous conference and will also be held at St. Tikhon's Monastery in South Canaan, PA. Once again, it will be held during Pentecost week, Tuesday through Thursday, June 5-6.

Gatherings of clergy have already taken place at which ideas for prospective topics were suggested. A variety of pastoral issues, from parish spirituality and administration to questions about visitations and bereavement, were presented. The exact themes and presentations are in the process of being worked out.

Almost two hundred bishops, priests and deacons gathered at the last conference. It was a blessed and memorable event. With God's help, this coming Conference will also be successful.

Decisions: The Value of Advance Directives." Unfortunately, when hospitalized in critical or terminal condition, patients are either unwilling or unable to complete advance directives. It is clear that the appropriate time for this is much earlier, before crisis or terminal illness occurs.

Advance Care Planning (ACP) is a proactive process that enables people to make decisions about future care in consultation with family, health care providers, clergy, and advisors. This dynamic planning process is an organized approach to reflection, discussions, understanding, and decision-making regarding preferences for end-of-life treatments. And with the right guidance and forethought, it enriches lives, brings families together, and provides peace of mind. Without clearly articulated treatment choices, healthcare professionals are required to provide full treatment.

While most people would like to die at home (90%), more than 80% will die in institutions, many in intensive care. Simply knowing about home care, hospice, and other options allows those with terminal illness to

die with dignity rather than in agony surrounded by healthcare staff. Some may have seen the recent Bill Moyers series on PBS, *"On Your Own Terms: Moyers on Dying."* ACP issues such as pain management, physician-led discussions moving from aggressive to palliative (comfort) care, and other steps allowing patient and family to prepare for death together were brought before a nation denying the reality of death.



The idea of forming palliative care teams, whose responsibility it is to walk with patients who are terminally ill through end-of-life decision-making is on the increase. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), a regulatory body regularly surveying hospitals and other health care providing organizations, will in 2001 be focusing on this area specifically. Web resources are being developed to help fill in the gap in providing important information both to those who may be agonizing over these decisions like my family did, and to healthcare providers. Physicians are slowly warming to the idea of discussing end-of-life care even though they are trained to focus ostensibly on treatment toward "successful" outcomes not including death. A recent study in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* revealed that better training in end-of-life care has resulted in a dramatic decrease of support, by oncologists, for euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

Gunderson-Lutheran Hospital in LaCrosse, Wisconsin implemented a community-based educational program in tandem with in-house

training in ACP. The results, in three year's time, revealed that over 90% of patients entering the hospital already had some form of advance directive completed, and those wishes were carried out 98% of the time. Our hospital, in Norwalk, CT, is currently exploring initiating a similar program.

As pastors we must continue to do our best not only to be informed about ACP, but also to provide essential leadership for our faithful who may be struggling with these issues. As it was with my family, it is often the pastor who models openness in discussing end-of-life care. Sermons and educational programs on ACP, visiting your area hospital to familiarize yourself with processes in place and forms in use, and actively meeting with those facing terminal illness are essential actions. This in turn empowers the faithful to express, reflect and pray on, and formulate their decisions in a way that all concerned both know and carry out those wishes, especially as many parishioners' families today include Orthodox and non-Orthodox members.

Comprehensive end-of-life care planning can actually assist one to live well. Setting out all his wishes regarding end-of-life treatment and funeral arrangements helped my father to live well. He no longer carried that burden alone. His family, parish priest, and care providers were all sharing it with him. He could turn to making the most of the rest of his life knowing that plans were fully discussed and prepared. Let us pastors seriously engage in this role, leading and comforting our faithful, especially as they interact with our technology-laden healthcare institutions, so that they may live well in this life as they prepare for the life in the world to come. □

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PASTORS TO PASTORS

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✦
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"Thoughts and Recollections"

"Pastors to Pastors" looks to another of the "elders" of the Church for guidance and inspiration. We are pleased herein to share our interview with

Fr Daniel Ressetar

Rector, Christ the Savior Orthodox Church, Harrisburg PA

Q. Fr. Daniel, what have been the outstanding moments in your forty-two years of priestly ministry?

A. There have been many outstanding moments. The consecration of our newly built church in Harrisburg on September 24, 1988, by His Beatitude, Metropolitan Theodosius and His Eminence, Archbishop Herman was a dream come true. It only came about after much planning, a great deal of prayer and many obstacles were overcome. It was a beautiful spiritual event, which affected me with a deep sense of humility because we all knew God was with us. Even today I look in awe at our Church of Christ the Savior.

Another great occasion was the Glorification of the Priest-Martyr Maksym (Sandowicz) of Carpatho-Rus. He was my great uncle who was slain in the then Austro-Hungary Empire on September 6, 1914. In 1989, Matushka Theodora and I were in Bialystok, Poland as houseguests of Archpriest Maksym, the son of the Martyr and his Matushka Tatiana. I had the privilege of concelebrating the Sunday Divine Liturgy with him. Later I served a Panikhida over the grave of the future Saint in Zdnja with His Eminence, Archbishop Adam of Sanok singing responses. The Glorification took place in Gorlice, Poland on September 10-11, 1994. With me were His Eminence, Archbishop Herman, His Eminence, Metropolitan Nicholas of the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese and other priests from the United States. His Beatitude, Metropolitan Basil of Warsaw, of blessed memory, was the main celebrant.

Still another memorable moment was the Midnight Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. I assisted His Eminence, Metropolitan Iakovos of the Jerusalem Patriarchate. Also assisting were three Greek Orthodox priests and a deacon. Nuns from the Holy Trinity Russian

Orthodox Cathedral sang the responses. The priests were with the Metropolitan in the enclosure of the rock-hewn tomb of Christ. It was confining and we were bumping into each other. During the Cherubic Hymn the deacon stooped down to get the chalice and paten on the tomb slab, because the Liturgy of Preparation was completed there. Whenever I looked to my left (as I was standing to the Metropolitan's right side), I saw the candle-lit tomb and the stone slab where Our Lord lay before His Resurrection.

**"We need to
hang in there"
for the sake of
Christ and His
Holy Church."**

-- Fr Ressetar

Q. Tell us about your childhood and early life in the Church.

A. My childhood was filled with music: singing church hymns and Russian folk songs, playing the violin, cello, flute and especially the piano. The Victrola played scratchy old "78s" of symphonic and choral music. Sometimes on Saturday mornings or at 7:00 AM during the week, before we went to school, my younger brother, two younger sisters and I used to sing responses to the Divine Liturgy celebrated by my father Archpriest Dimitri, of blessed memory. I used to be excused from school to come to church and do the readings and singing for funerals. Our family, including my mother, Matushka Margaret (she is 95 years old!) never thought of not singing in the church choir for vespers or for any other liturgical occasion. We sang in

Church Slavonic including works such as Archangelsky's "Mercy of Peace" #4 and Bortniansky's "Cherubic Hymn" #7. Once, late on a hot summer night, on the back porch the four of us sang Tchaikovsky's "Creed" by memory. To this day, the Ressetar quartet sings when we have the opportunity.

Q. In your opinion, what have been the most significant changes in Orthodox parishes during the past couple of decades, for better or worse?

A. As I see it a significant change for the worse is the reluctance and resistance to singing in the church. People just don't feel like singing, and when they do it is with apathy. Of course, this does not apply to everyone. Teenagers don't join the choir or have time to attend rehearsals. It is, however, always encouraging to see people join the choir later in life, when active involvement as parents is over with.

Another negative aspect is the lack of gratitude that so many people have. Though they have many blessings, spiritual benefits and healing, people are so ungrateful. Some have even renounced the Church after they obtained what they wanted. How can anyone be so thankful to God, to parishes and priests, after arrangements were made on their behalf for adoption of infants, or for their refugee and immigration sponsorships, involving so much time-consuming emotional stress and financial burdens? I'll never understand.

On the positive side, I've noticed a good change in the dedication of the strong, small "remnant" of parishioners. They generally contribute well financially, strive for theosis and sing, even when they don't feel like it. This remnant provides a high motivation for us priests. We need to "hang in there" for the sake of Christ and His Holy Church.

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Q. During the past several years you have been much involved in pastoral work in prison. Share with us some of the issues involved in this special ministry.

A. As a rule, the man or woman in jail is a forgotten individual. Although few Orthodox are incarcerated the percentage is rising slowly. In October, 1996, at the first Orthodox Prison Workers Conference in St. Augustine, Florida, I learned that I had the distinction of being the first full-time government paid Orthodox Prison Chaplain in the U.S.A. At first, I was a volunteer priest then a part-time case manager. Eventually Dauphin County Commissioners appointed me as a Chaplain with a flexible schedule. When my parish grew and built a new church, I retired after eight years.

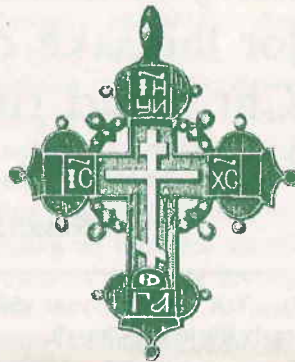
Most Orthodox clergy and laity just won't make visits to jail. They seem to be either timid or claustrophobic, or both. Once I invited about 20 to 25 Orthodox priests to come to prison and share lunch with the inmates in the dining hall. Not one came!

Obviously the major pastoral issue concerning prison ministry is the death penalty. At the All-American Councils, resolutions condemning abortion on demand passed swiftly and unanimously, as they should have. However, it was evident at the plenary session in 1989 that on the issue of the abolition of the death penalty that the

Orthodox Church is not yet totally "pro-life," having reservations about the "sanctity of life." Fortunately, the resolution supporting the abolition of the death penalty was approved, but narrowly. I was overwhelmed to see a number of clergy speak strongly against it. I expected lay delegates to fight it, but not the strong resistance from my peers. Some of my fellow priests shunned me afterwards. A few clearly avoided me!

When I retired as County Prison Chaplain, the local newspaper, *The Patriot-News*, interviewed me for an article in the religion section. Here is what I told them:

"Sometimes you might do something good for one person. To get one sheep is worth it. Sometimes an innocent man or woman might be on death row. It is always that one person who might get lost in the shuffle that we have to protect. Let's never forget that there was one innocent man, the most perfect human who ever lived on this earth, who was a victim of the death penalty. His name: Jesus Christ, Our Lord." □



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"The Lord Will Not Desert Us"

*From St Ephrem the Syrian's
"Hymn on the Church."*



Rely on the truth and fear not, my brothers,
for our Lord is not weak that He should desert us in trials.
He is the power on Whom depends the creation and its inhabitants.
On Him depends the hope of His church.
Blessed is He Whose power came down and was revealed in His churches!
Bestow on yourselves, my brothers, the treasure of consolation from the word our Lord spoke to His church,
"The bars of hell cannot conquer her."
If, indeed, she is mightier than hell, who among mortals can frighten her?
Blessed is He who made her great yet has tested her that she might be greater!
Grant, my Lord, by Your grace that we all may hold fast to You!
Blessed is He Whose grace protects us!
Blessed is He Who worked in us grace without measure!

PASTORS TO PASTORS is published by the OCA Department of Pastoral Life and Ministry, PO Box 675, Syosset NY 11791, and is distributed to all hierarchs, parish and institutional clergy, military chaplains, and monastic clergy, active and retired, on the rolls of the Orthodox Church in America, and to OCA seminarians.

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