



LUKENOTES

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CASE STUDY

"Father Jack" • Anxiety, Anger and Shame

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Fr. Jack currently serves as a parochial vicar in a two man parish. Since his ordination five years ago, he has served in two parish settings and has held an advisory position on a diocesan committee. To this assignment, Fr. Jack brings a great deal of enthusiasm and what he considers a professional way of ministering. His pastoral style is very different from that of his pastor, who has a more laid-back, less time-conscious style of leading and interacting.

Fr. Jack has recently found himself in the position of receiving complaints about the pastor's lateness or absence. His attempts to bring this to the pastor's attention have not met with success. As a relatively new priest and parish team member, he has become resentful and anxious, feeling both caught in the middle and ineffective in his ministry. Fr. Jack has found himself in the position of "holding down the fort" in crisis times because the pastor is either occupied with other responsibilities or away.

Fr. Jack initially responded to this situation by conforming and picking up the slack. While this appeared to be working at first, Fr. Jack was paying a heavy toll internally. He experienced significant stress as he covered for the pastor, frequently rearranged his schedule and assumed responsibility at times unexpectedly. These stressors were tapping into his self-doubt, a dimension of Fr. Jack's experience that he had carefully hidden even from himself.

Fr. Jack's impatience began to show in pastoral relationships, particularly when time and space boundaries were not honored. Parishioners began to complain of his reactivity. Increasingly, Fr. Jack's internal dialogue became more negative as he blamed himself for all of the parish difficulties. Old messages of being unworthy or not good enough became part of his daily thinking. A supportive fellow priest in whom Fr. Jack confided suggested that he seek counseling. Fr. Jack agreed that he needed some help as he was increasingly concerned about the intensity of his anxiety and anger and his recurring feelings of shame, of not being good enough.

Shame is a profound and painful emotion. Potter-Effron, in *Letting Go of Shame*, describes shame as a feeling that one's whole self is damaged. It is far more comprehensive than guilt

over flawed behavior. It is a profound sense that as a person one is irrevocably flawed. Shame inserts itself into one's very core and identity. A person who is shame-bound feels that an audience before whom one can be exposed is always at hand. This audience is usually composed of people whose opinions greatly matter.

While Potter-Effron speaks of "good shame" as an aide to character development, "overwhelming shame" usually leads to isolation. This makes symptom relief difficult and personal growth even more elusive. Fr. Jack was caught between who he wanted to be and who he feared he was: an irretrievably damaged human being.

Anxiety, Anger and Shame

What is it about Fr. Jack that leads him to not only impatience and anger but to shame as well? His initial psychological evaluation led to the identification of some rather significant and long-standing unaddressed underlying conflicts.

Through the pre-treatment evaluation, Fr. Jack began to see how he tried to control his feelings, particularly his anxiety and feelings of low self-esteem. He had developed a pattern of suppressing resentments and then later erupting for no apparent reason. Psychological testing revealed a need to maintain an image of consideration, competence, and cooperation. Further examination also revealed that he had high and unrealistic expectations for himself and others. As a result, he came across to parishioners, especially to those with clear vulnerabilities, as demanding and unsympathetic. Fr. Jack was clearly aware of his behaviors and unhappy with them. He wanted to understand why he found it so hard to calm down once he became upset.

Fr. Jack's treatment included individual and group therapy. Insights began to surface early as he worked on his autobiography. While he readily admitted his early childhood years were quite traumatic, involving recurring fights and violence between himself and his older brother, he began to recognize that his present reactions were related to these deep-seated early experiences.

Fr. Jack now realizes that his sense of loyalty to his dad and to the memory of his mother were an obstacle to his acceptance of the full picture of his early years. He often found himself alone in the house with someone whose behavior was unpredictable and at times violent. He now realizes how frightening that experience was and how much anger toward his parents he had repressed. When he reached early adolescence and was able to fight back, he dealt with his brother's antagonism by using physical violence to keep his brother in check.

In therapy, Fr. Jack learned to acknowledge his anger while also maintaining a genuine love for both parents. Through the use of biofeedback, Fr. Jack realized that he was rarely relaxed, even when he assumed he was. As time in therapy progressed, his therapist helped him to realize that he developed his problematic behaviors in his efforts to survive his early

trauma experiences. Many of those behavior patterns were now interfering with his relationships, particularly his hypervigilance, intense anxiety and reactivity, detachment from others, and efforts to avoid people and situations that he could not control. Fr. Jack learned to recognize the presence of the consistent underlying anxiety he feels and the accompanying ever-present shame.

Individual therapy afforded him a safe setting in which to explore his repressed feelings of anger and grief. Group therapy allowed him an opportunity to experiment with new and less violent ways of responding to people and situations that he found uncomfortable or threatening. He learned that he could regulate the intensity of his emotional reactions and give himself some space to choose responses in the present that reflected the person he wanted to be and the kind of ministry he wanted to offer. Gradually he was able to feel empathy for people he had previously avoided or attacked. Finally, through spiritual direction, Fr. Jack was able to let go of shame as he grew in his awareness that he is unconditionally loved by God.

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