

Case Study: Father Alan

Father Alan is a 48-year-old diocesan priest who was asked by his bishop to accept a new pastorate. Although recently experiencing some mild depression, he thought a change of scenery might help. He also had concerns about having to live alone and pastor a parish twice the size of his previous parish. Wanting to honor his promise of obedience and not wanting to displease his bishop, he felt it his responsibility to say yes. He told himself "God will provide."

Fr. Alan was busier than ever at his new parish. He never said no to anyone and tried to meet everyone's expectations. He received positive feedback from parishioners. However, he was feeling overwhelmed by the demands of ministry. He was resentful at ordinary requests. One time he yelled at an elderly parishioner. His friends stopped calling because he was unavailable. He took no time to pray nor days off. His meals consisted of fast food late at night with a few nightcaps. He noticed he was not as successful in fighting his depression and was becoming lethargic.

Parishioners began asking Fr. Alan if he was okay. He responded, "Everything is fine." When the chair of the pastoral council confronted him, Fr. Alan decided he needed to get help. He met with the bishop who sat with him as a friend and said he would support him in whatever would help. Fr. Alan chose to come to Saint Luke Institute for an evaluation. The evaluation team recommended that he stay for treatment to address depression and generalized anxiety.

Paying Attention to the God of my Experience

Spiritual integration sessions are a core component of the Saint Luke Institute residential treatment program in addition to psychological, educational, and physical health components. Fr. Alan began his spiritual integration sessions speaking of being attracted to and afraid of his spiritual journey. He was encouraged to tell God what he desired. In his prayer he became aware of his desire "to be loved by the One I

love." He set aside a half hour for daily quiet prayer, something he had not done since seminary days. He was beginning to feel at home within himself, and his prayer gave him a desire to go deeper. On his first bi-monthly Day of Recollection, he felt centered. He felt that maybe the Lord would be able to love him. He desired to *experience* the Lord's love for him and recognized he needed to surrender and trust.

As Fr. Alan's prayer deepened, he experienced greater stillness. He felt he was moving closer to God. He told God he needed God not to rescue him or take away his loneliness but to be with him in his pain and struggle. He experienced God challenging him to honesty and authenticity. He realized that God wanted a partnership with him in a relationship of mutual companionship. Fr. Alan experienced God saying "let me comfort you." He cried in relating this in his spiritual integration session. He said he felt embraced by God and tried to stay with this experience. This was the first time in his life he had ever felt unconditionally accepted. In growing up Fr. Alan could never measure up in his father's eyes. He was always trying to prove to his dad what a good son he was. He realized that God was not pointing out his flaws or mistakes, and that he did not have to do anything to earn God's love. Fr. Alan was encouraged to internalize God's image of him as a beloved son. This image would provide a grounding experience when he doubted his self-worth.

Growing in Freedom

Fr. Alan spoke of a new freedom as he befriended his feelings. He felt God was inviting him to embrace his humanness and to be real with God. This led him to the insight, "If God accepts me, then I can also be accepted by others." It was okay to not be perfect, he did not have to be super priest. He began paying attention to his own needs. His newly discovered spirituality of powerlessness and imperfection made Fr. Alan realize that everything did not depend on him. He felt relieved of a huge burden. He recognized that his unhealthy patterns of needing to be needed and fostering

others' dependency on him were self-destructive. He said he was beginning to feel like a child, an image that encompassed feelings of openness and trust, that gave him energy and hope.

Signs of Spiritual Integration

As Fr. Alan continued to focus on his inner experiences he became noticeably calmer. He felt both his prayer and his therapy were calling him to be, to let go and to trust God. During his later spiritual integration sessions, Fr. Alan deepened his understanding of what it meant to live a celibate lifestyle. He knew he would need to develop more realistic boundaries between the time he spent working and the time he prioritized for self-care. He grew in awareness that to be a pastor did not mean he had to do everything himself. He was ultimately responsible, but he could delegate to others. To be healthy as a priest he wanted to foster a balance that included prayer, exercise, reading, ongoing education, a regular day off, vacation time, as well as an annual retreat and several Days of Recollection. He committed himself to reading books that will continue to nurture his spiritual integration (such as *Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet*, by Katherine Dyckman and L. Patrick Carroll). He decided to meet monthly with a trained spiritual director, join a priests' support group, and renew his priestly friendships. He left treatment having attained more self-knowledge and a more intimate relationship with God.

Fr. John Rose is Director of the Spirituality Program at Saint Luke Institute.

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