

# **Does burnout come from hard work?**

**By Bishop Paul V. Marshall**

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*This is Bishop Paul Marshall's April column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first Saturday of every month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. More than 110 columns have been published over the past ten years.*

I think I have discovered what unites religious professionals of every creed or tradition: the concept of clergy "burnout." Google on "clergy burnout," "rabbi burnout" or "imam burnout." You'll find more results than you can handle.

At this Easter season western Christian clergy are at their busiest time of the year. Some have been feeling anticipatory exhaustion for weeks. Some are tacitly planning to be exhausted by sundown on Easter. Some have already begun to garner the sympathy of congregants or parishioners, quietly anticipating the display of a martyred visage at the final Alleluia-Amen.

"Conspicuous exhaustion" unfortunately shifts the focus of the celebration to the celebrant. I have been thinking about that. I routinely ask clergy who experience the temptation to self-pity when the holiest times of the year arrive if we pity athletes who get to play in World Series or musicians who get to play Carnegie Hall. Of course we don't. That's Big Time. One embraces such an opportunity with joy and energy.

The New Testament teaches that it was for "the joy that was set before him" that Jesus embraced the agony of the cross. Should your pastor or priest start to look a little glum towards the end of the holidays, offer a hearty handshake and say "You look great. It must be so energizing to lead this celebration!"

It doesn't always work, but I have seen a few clergy mature when they realized that exhaustion and exhilaration are choices. Some had never been told that it was a great gift to be at the center of holy festivity. In clergy circles there is a special reverence paid to those who die at the altar or in the pulpit. Over the years, many have been taught that their job was to suffer, to burn out.

Is it possible that such a cultural pattern is not limited to clergy? Who else approaches the holidays with dread? I can remember people working hard to make family celebrations so perfect for everyone else that they themselves had a miserable time, were exhausted at the end, began to hate the holidays, and strangely enough, repeated the pattern with a fidelity we normally reserve only for the instructions on the shampoo bottle. Lather, rinse ... repeat.

Assuming that no one is consciously trying to lather up to martyrdom, what do burned-out clergy and household holiday-haters have in common?

It's not the work. Curiously, research suggests that people do not burn out from hard work. After all, no one builds a business or makes a cultural or scientific advance by working 40 hours a week. It's not hard work that burns us out. We burn out when we commit to what is essentially impossible. The most impossible thing is the responsibility we take on for somebody else's happiness, salvation, or destiny.

Interestingly, there are people, clergy or not, who will enjoy the celebrations. There are people who enjoy feeding others, who enjoy leading festivity. Nothing has to be perfect, and it's up to other people whether they benefit or not. There are people who know a World Series when they play one – and delight in it.

The resurrection of Christ is the central and determinative mystery of the Christian year. I suggest giving up for Easter any thing, any attitude, that keeps us from entering fully into its celebration. Many churches light a huge "paschal candle" for the 50 days of Easter: let it burn on, not up!

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