

Finding help, healing depression

This past May I celebrated my 48th anniversary as a priest. When I add to that number 12 previous years of seminary training – six at St. Charles in Catonsville (now Charlestown), two at St. Mary's on Paca Street (also closed) and four years at St. Mary's in Roland Park – it all adds up to 60 years of “religious life.”

My best friend, Bill Kristofco, left the priesthood, and is now a happy father and grandfather. My other priest friends from those 12 years in the seminary, Father Herb Derwart of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Locust Point; Father Blair Raum of St. Patrick's in Fells Point; and Monsignor Ed Miller, pastor of St. Bernardine, are all deceased.

In the 1970s, in the early days of my priesthood, I used to go on vacation with the three of them. We would rent a house near the beach in Avalon, N.J. Those were great times.

My closest family members were my sister, Helen, and my brother in law, Mike. Their deaths were followed shortly by the death of Monsignor Miller. After Ed's funeral, a priest friend said to me: “Joe, I've never seen you look so devastated.”

That was the beginning of my depression.

Oh, I still functioned. I still continued my ministry at Oak Crest. I still continued my counseling ministry, but I found myself saying no to so many other requests for ministry. I didn't understand what was going on. I always felt overwhelmed. I always felt tired.

Back in the “old days,” I wrote a radio script every week, a Catholic Review column every week, a sermon every week, and also did numerous retreats and days of recollection. I always had energy for one more thing. Now I didn't understand myself.

Fortunately, a friend recommended a good therapist. I began to take some medications. I continue to cope better.

My pain helped me to understand Jesus even better. His long nights in prayer, and his many days in the desert alone, were his way of coping with pain. His tears at the death of Lazarus helps us to see his humanity. And Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead. I couldn't raise my family and friends from the dead.

I share my story in the hopes that it will help someone else. There's no shame in sharing our limitations. None of us would hesitate to go to medical professionals for broken bones or any physical problem. However, there is still some reluctance to seek help for our emotional pain. Many people try to medicate themselves with alcohol or illegal drugs. Our pride can lead us to disastrous choices.

No surgeon operates on himself. We all need God. We all need each other. And God usually comes to us through each other.