

Priests focus on resilience in ministry during enrichment day

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MIDDLETOWN - Vincentian Father Sylvester Peterka was attending a priests' enrichment day focused on resilience in ministry when a text popped up on his phone Oct. 10. One of his senior parishioners was in the hospital and was looking for someone to visit her. That same day, a young man called the pastor looking for counsel. Earlier, Father Peterka had to go to a parish meeting that made him late for the enrichment day.

Even when the Baltimore pastor of Immaculate Conception and St. Cecilia was taking a day away to explore ways of not being overwhelmed in his ministry, the demands of his vocation followed him.

"I think sometimes parishioners will say, 'Oh, Father, you are doing too much,'" the pastor said, "but one of the difficulties you have is the idea of, 'Don't do so much, but do everything I need.'"

Father Peterka joined 73 priests who came together at Holy Family Catholic Community in Middletown to reflect on ways they can avoid burning out while also cultivating an active prayer life.

Dr. Robert Wicks, professor of psychology at Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore, led the discussion. An expert on the stress that can arise from reaching out to others, Wicks challenged the priests to make time to care for their own well-being so that they will have the strength to continue ministering to others.

"One of the greatest gifts we can give another person is our own sense of peace and perspective," Wicks said, "but we can't give what we don't have."

The author of more than 40 books encouraged priests to prioritize what is important

in their ministries. He urged them to make time for daily prayer and to maintain a network of friends who can support and challenge them.

“Don’t have unrealistic expectations,” he said. “You are never going to meet the expectations of those around you.”

During a discussion, priests outlined some of the many challenges they face - many of them brought on by increased pressures related to the declining number of priests. Some priests are running multiple parishes. Others shepherd communities of more than 4,000 families.

“As a pastor, the challenge for me is not taking the problems of the parish on myself,” said Father Erik Arnold, pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Ellicott City. “So the parish has debt and I make it my debt or the buildings have issues and it becomes the thing that keeps me awake at night. You have to learn to keep enough of a distance between situations where you are trying to help make things better - whether it’s in the life of the parish or in individual lives - so those things don’t completely pull you down.”

Monsignor Paul Byrnes, a retired priest who lives in Western Maryland, said that although he is happy in retirement, one of his challenges is not seeing his brother priests as often as he would like. There are fewer priests available in his region, he said.

“Not having as many opportunities to be with other priests is a problem for me,” he said. “What helps me is prayer, and I have a whole morning routine that I spend with just me and God.”

Monsignor Byrnes also maintains a blog, “Half Hermit by the Lake,” that he finds helpful.

Many priests said they were happy in their ministry - and Monsignor Byrnes pointed to a recent book by Monsignor Stephen Rossetti that found most priests are happy. Not becoming overwhelmed in the amount of work of their vocation is critical for maintaining their well-being.

“You do what you can and you put it all in God’s hands,” Father Peterka said.

Enrichment days and other fraternal events are also important, he said.

“It creates a sense that we’re in this together,” he said. “It’s a real blessing.”