

Strong spiritual life helps keep priests from burnout

ROME - A strong spiritual life supported by reading and reflecting on sacred Scripture can help protect priests from the emotional exhaustion of burnout, said an influential Jesuit journal.

In a Sept. 15 article released to journalists Sept. 13, *La Civiltà Cattolica* summarized the results of a recent survey on the presence and causes of burnout among diocesan priests in Padua, in northern Italy.

The Rome-based biweekly journal, reviewed by the Vatican Secretariat of State before publication, said the researchers were unable to elaborate on their brief suggestion that “a steady spiritual life” could have a positive effect on an overburdened clergy.

The Jesuit journal said in its opinion spiritual reading or “lectio divina” is a “tried and true protection” against spiritual and emotional depletion.

The survey was published last year by the University of Padua.

Of the diocese’s 450 priests, 321 responded to the survey.

In the *Civiltà* article, Jesuit Father Giandomenico Mucci outlined the results of the survey that measured the intensity of symptoms of burnout, which include a feeling of failure in one’s vocation, chronic fatigue, emotional and mental exhaustion, a feeling of helplessness or hopelessness, a negative self-esteem and cynicism.

Of the 321 respondents, 124 priests said they felt “everything was OK,” while another 124 said they felt the whole gamut of burnout symptoms such as “high levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and little sense of personal fulfillment.”

The other 73 priests said they felt a high degree of only one or a few specified feelings of dissatisfaction, exhaustion, distancing from others or depersonalization.

Researchers found that living with other priests had no bearing on preventing or healing an “exhausted” priest’s sense of isolation and hopelessness.

The survey found that “the number of burned-out priests increased when their level of pastoral activity decreased,” that is, the number of priests in crisis grows “with their disengagement from their ministry,” the article said. Among the priests who felt satisfied with their work, many of them were very active on a pastoral level, it

said.

Researchers asked the priests what they thought caused their sense of burnout. They were not given a menu of reasons to choose from “so as not to influence” their responses, it said.

The majority said they felt not enough was being done to address their inner being or inner selves.

Many other responses blamed outside causes such as work overload, the stress of unpredictable days, the frustration of feeling like one is “offering a product that does not seem to correspond to people’s real needs,” and being in frequent contact with people experiencing very difficult situations or living conditions.

Celibacy was also cited as a reason for burnout. Some priests said the lack of affection and not being able to fully express themselves to another person led to an “implosion of feelings” and a sense of helplessness.

Some priests lamented formation programs that put too much emphasis on their calling to help others and not enough on the need to also take care of themselves and to cultivate “a true life of communion” with other priests.

The article concluded that a daily commitment to reflecting on the word of God and other spiritual writings would “revitalize the priest’s faith” and reinforce his reasons for entering into priestly ministry.

Learning to look with God’s eyes and recognizing the insignificance of personal failures will help the priest “count on that grace that sustains the weak and those beaten down by life who press on with humility and love.”

A 2002 Vatican instruction for priests, “The Priest: Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community,” also urged a consistent prayer life and eucharistic adoration as a means to prevent priestly burnout.

The instruction said, “Christian families and fervent communities have often assisted their priests in times of crisis.”

It encouraged efforts that kept “alive in the hearts of the faithful that joy and holy pride” in being Catholic and called for improving a “certain osmosis” between the faith of the priest and his parishioners.