



**PEP
TALKS**
FOR

Parish ministers & leaders

ENCOURAGEMENT,
SUPPORT, GUIDANCE

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Introduction

Some days, everything in our lives runs on track. Our responsibilities and relationships are in sync and effortless. Other days, everything seems to fall apart. We end up discouraged and demoralized. Those times call for words of encouragement and support. They call for a spiritual pep talk.

Are there times you feel like that as a parish minister? One day, everything is going smoothly, effortlessly, and with a feeling of accomplishment. The next day, you find yourself questioning, discouraged, overwhelmed, or worried.

Jesus says to each of us, "Come to me you who labor and are weary..." (Matthew 11:28). On our dark days, our frustrating days, Jesus welcomes us, in all our tiredness and hesitations. On those days, we depend on each other, we support each other, we encourage each other, and we point out to each other all the good that we might sometimes miss.

During your prayerful moments, amid the discouraging times, may these reflections of guidance, insight, and vision remind you who you are, whose you are, and the sacred ministry to which you are called.

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How did this job get so complicated?

Meetings...budgets...planning...reports...volunteer management...conflict...more meetings.... Few of us anticipated parish ministry involving so much to do and so little time to do it. With multiple expectations from parishioners, parish leaders, volunteers, and staff members, the role can wear us down and out. As one parish minister put it, “Am I a minister or a professional go-fer?”

It helps to step back every once in a while and breathe. In the process, we remember that we cannot—and should not—go it alone. After all, Jesus called upon others to join in his mission. If he needed help in his ministry, it stands to reason that we do too. Baldwin of Forde, a twelfth-century monk, described patience as “a spiritual cart” in which we can carry our burdens with greater ease. Use this lovely image to cut yourself some slack and to rest easy in knowing that God is carrying you along, no matter how hectic life gets.

TO DO » Open your Bible to Isaiah 41:10. Mark this or another favorite passage and turn to it whenever you feel overwhelmed. Relax in the hope that God will give you the strength and stamina you need to carry out your ministerial role in a caring and compassionate way.

TO PRAY » *Gracious God, remind me to look to you for the guidance, support, and strength I need to minister to your people.*

I never expected this many meetings.

The humorist Dave Barry wrote, “If you had to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve, its full potential, that word would be ‘meetings.’” Parish meetings serve an important function—developing strategies and plans and coordinating the various liturgies, programs, and events for the community. When badly managed, however, they become a drain on both our time and energy.

Whether you are leading or simply attending a meeting, consider the way in which coming together reflects a commitment to being the body of Christ. Your positive attitude has the potential to steer a meeting toward something worthwhile and productive. Pay close attention to others. Seize the opportunity to learn more about them and what drives their needs, concerns, wants, and fears. If we remain open, even fractious gatherings have something to teach us.

TO DO » Approach your next meeting with a generous mind and heart. Bring along a prayer or reflection that will add a spiritual tone to the gathering. Listen carefully to others, and refrain from interrupting. Afterward, reflect on what transpired. What did you learn about others, yourself, and the work of the parish as a result of the meeting?

TO PRAY » *Loving God, when I struggle with the need for yet another meeting, grant me patience and good humor. May my presence contribute to the good of the parish and all whom we serve.*

Can't just one day go as planned?

Just when we think all of our plans are in place, a volunteer drops out, a snowstorm hits, or someone dies. One of the most vital skills of creative ministry is flexibility. Because we are dealing with people—and all of the needs and concerns they bring with them—there is no airtight way in which to approach our work. The best we can do is hold things loosely.

Jesus is certainly a model for this. Look at how many times his plans were waylaid. While hoping for an enjoyable meal with friends, he gets dragged into a conflict between Martha and Mary. When trying to find a quiet place to pray, he is followed by a crowd seeking healing and consolation. Each time, he meets the person and situation with grace. To minister in his name is a call to respond with generosity and hospitality. Sometimes this means ditching our best-laid plans so that we bring consolation and hope to others. At the end of the day, that makes our ministerial efforts all the more rewarding.

TO DO » The next time something unexpected calls for a change of plans, reflect on the creativity with which you responded. Give thanks for a job that is anything but boring and repetitious!

TO PRAY » *Come to my aid, Jesus, when I am challenged by an interruption. May I respond with the patience, grace, and compassion you showed to those who sought your healing.*

I don't do well with conflict.

It's amazing how conflict can alternately flare up and smolder within a parish. It erupts over trivial matters, such as moving a statue, or over matters tied to deeper issues of inclusivity, justice, and wise stewardship. In an institution founded on gospel values of forgiveness, compassion, and mercy, parish conflict can be especially demoralizing.

The diversity within the church includes a rich mix of world-views, experiences, and ideas. It's inevitable that some of these will rub up against one another. By responding in a thoughtful and appropriate manner, we discover conflict's positive potential. On a personal level, we can make an intentional effort to "fight fairly"—i.e., by identifying the problem, avoiding personal attacks, listening with an open mind, and remaining attentive to the feelings of others. By responding this way, we can find hope in almost any situation. It means we can even use conflict to build community and further the mission of the church.

TO DO » Before speaking, ask yourself these questions about your words that have the power to hurt or heal: Are they true? Are they necessary? Are they kind?

TO PRAY » *Spirit of peace, brace me for the inevitability of conflict. May my words and deeds reflect a deep respect for others and a grounding in your grace. Amen.*

There aren't enough hours in the day...

Time issues plague just about everyone these days, but they are especially wearing in parish work. Maintaining a frenetic pace is hardly an ideal formula for authentic parish ministry.

Because pastoral ministry involves the needs of others, it's important to develop a time management system that is flexible and fluid. This means taking care of practical matters as well as embracing "Kairos" time. The latter is time unhampered by clocks and calendars. It is a contemplative view, one in which all time is viewed as an opportunity. It also honors the need for replenishment through prayer and reflection. We then return to the tasks at hand with renewed energy. Kairos might be realized in extended periods, such as retreats or a daily practice of contemplation. It also includes five-minute "joy breaks" throughout the day. When we befriend time, we discover it needn't be managed as much as enjoyed.

TO DO » Treat your calendar like a prayer book. As you record a plan or appointment, pause to give thanks for the gift of time in which to minister to others.

TO PRAY » *Spirit of all time, release me from anxiety over all I need to do. Inspire me to embrace all time as sacred and to make the best use of it for the good of all.*