

EASTERN ORTHODOX CLERGY: AN AT-RISK POPULATION

by [George Stavros](#)



“I know how weak and puny my soul is. I know the magnitude of this ministry and the great difficulty of the work. More stormy billows vex the soul of the priest than the gales that trouble the sea.” (St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood)

At the end of the 4th Century, over 1600 years ago, a not-yet-ordained St. John Chrysostom was engaging with the deeply personal question of whether to move forward in answering a call to the priesthood. Many of his insights into the challenges of ordained ministry are no less relevant for 21st century Eastern Orthodoxy in America as they were for the Church of 4th and 5th century Antioch. Priests of the Eastern Orthodox Church are precious and unique

members of the Body of Christ, with roles and expectations that place them at the center of the spiritual lives of the people and communities they have been called to serve. The challenges that they and their families face in carrying out their sacred work in an increasingly secular culture cannot be underestimated, something which both ancient patristic wisdom and modern social science affirm.

The Pastoral Role as a Risk Factor

“A priest ought to be sober minded, and penetrating in discernment, and possess a thousand eyes looking in every direction, for he lives not for himself alone but for a great multitude.” (St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood)

Social science research on clergy wellness points to the unique role of clergy as “first responders” who are expected to provide skilled pastoral care for situations including mental health and substance abuse crises, family and financial emergencies, and episodes of profound loss and grief. Frequently, clergy are called upon to step into situations that require significantly higher levels of professional training and authority than they possess, with the expectation that they skillfully shepherd their injured flock to the resources needed for stabilization and healing. This is in addition to the liturgical, administrative, teaching, and preaching aspects of their positions. Vicarious trauma (the impact of regular exposure to the trauma and deep suffering of others) and burnout are ever-present risks when relentless pastoral responsibility occurs without adequate training and support.

Relational Aggression as a Risk Factor

“For all who surround him are ready to smite and overthrow him, not only his enemies and foes, but many of those who pretend to love him.” (St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood)

While Chrysostom’s words may come across as hyperbolic, findings from research undertaken recently at the Danielsen Institute at Boston University validate the reality of the relational challenges that Greek Orthodox clergy face on a daily basis. In a study of Greek Orthodox clergy and clergy spouses in America, over 40% of the 200 respondents endorsed trauma-related symptoms

at a level that potentially met criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a number far higher than in the general population. Resonating with Chrysostom's observations, the main source of the stress and trauma experienced by these clergy and their families was the relational aggression to which they were subjected in the context of ministry.

Some of these sources included: interactions with suffering, angry, troubled, and sometimes sadistic parishioners who focus their attention and grievances on the priest and priest's family ("I've had frightening encounters with angry parishioners."); lay leaders, particularly members of parish councils, seeking to secure power and influence within the parish community ("The same three council members have bullied me for years."); and, experiencing a lack of support from one's presiding hierarch ("The bishop's lack of support was devastating and inexplicable"). While not all episodes of relational aggression are in-and-of-themselves traumatic, when combined with a lack of protective relationships, structures, and authority, risks for trauma symptoms increase dramatically.

Narcissism as a Risk Factor

"If a man is passionate or mean, or conceited or boastful, or anything else of the kind, it (the priesthood) unveils all his shortcomings and speedily lays them bare." (St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood)

Most approaches to human psychology point to the impact that early relational experiences and environments have on human development throughout the lifespan. Loving early relational experiences tend to be protective sources of resilience over the lifespan, while abusive, neglectful, and loss-filled early relationships can create long-term challenges around trust and intimacy. Clergy are hardly immune to these developmental realities. In fact, a significant number of clergy carry with them the impact of early relational trauma and loss, experiences which make them even more vulnerable within the challenging milieu of ministry. Recent research on religious leaders points to how this can play out in a particular kind of struggle for clergy, between humility and self-protective narcissism.

This research defines humility as consisting of accurate self-knowledge, openness and hospitality towards others, low concern for social status, solidarity

with the oppressed, and the ability to manage feelings of shame and pride—traits often associated with effective religious leadership. Humility is characterized by openness to God, to oneself, and to others. Narcissism, on the other hand, is characterized by fear, self-protection, seeing oneself as small and weak, and seeing others as potentially threatening. Two types of narcissism are considered—vulnerable and grandiose. Narcissistically vulnerable clergy have strong needs to be seen as “good,” tend to hide their vulnerabilities, often focus their attention on parishioners they see as good, protective, and “on their side,” and can be emotionally unstable in interpersonal conflicts. Narcissistically grandiose clergy have a strong need to be seen as exceptional and tend to be interpersonally manipulative, dominant, and pursue power and control over others. Traits of both vulnerable and grandiose narcissism are common in clergy experiencing burnout, high levels of interpersonal conflict, and boundary violations.

Caring for the Body of Christ

“The priest must be protected on all sides by steel armor, by intense earnestness, and perpetual watchfulness concerning his manner of life, lest someone discovering an exposed and neglected spot should inflict a deadly wound.” (St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood)

At the same time, the vulnerabilities described above are far from insurmountable. Consistent hierarchical advocacy and support for clergy and clergy families who have dedicated their lives to serving the church is critical. Continuing education, training, and peer support groups are proven interventions for clergy and clergy spouses. Education and training for parish leaders is already under way in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, and needs to be expanded, with a goal of establishing cultures of collaboration and mutual support between clergy and parish leadership. Finally, effective and loving therapeutic resources must continue to be identified and made available to care for clergy and clergy families facing mental health issues.

References/Further Reading

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