The Plague of Perfectionism

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Like a plague, perfectionism is widespread, afflicting countless lives with a host of harmful physical, emotional, and spiritual results. The literature on perfectionism associates it with a wide variety of diagnostic labels, such as alcoholism, irritable bowel syndrome, depression, anorexia, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, abdominal pain in children, writer's block, ulcerative colitis, and Type A coronary-prone behavior. Spiritually, the demon of perfectionism can rob sincere Christians of their peace of soul by torturing them with unremitting self-criticism and deafening them to the Good News of their unconditional acceptance by a loving and forgiving God. This article examines the phenomenon of perfectionism from both a psychological and a spiritual perspective. It explores some of the roots and manifestations of perfectionism, as well as its harmful influence on spiritual growth and ministerial effectiveness.

NOT A STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE

A detriment to psychological and spiritual health, perfectionism must be clearly distinguished from the healthy pursuit of excellence that motivates many talented people. Those who appreciate their potential and take genuine pleasure in striving to meet high standards, like the self-actualizing individuals studied by psychologist Abraham Maslow, should not be confused with neurotic perfectionists who constantly demand a higher level of performance than they can obtain. Because their standards are beyond reach or reason, perfectionists strain compulsively and relentlessly toward impossible goals and measure their worth in terms of productivity and accomplishment. Never feeling that their efforts are enough, they are unable to achieve a sense of satisfaction because they think that what they do is insufficiently good to warrant that feeling. In contrast, those who take pleasure in doing their best without needing to be perfect tend to be satisfied with their efforts, even when the results leave room for improvement. According to Don E. Hamachek, perfectionists commonly report "feeling anxious, confused, and emotionally drained before a new task is even begun," and they are "motivated not so much by desire for improvement as they are by fear of failure." On the other hand, those who strive for excellence in a nonneurotic way are "more likely to report feeling excited, clear about what needs to be done, and emotionally charged." They may care passionately about doing things well, but unlike perfectionists, they know how to be gentle with themselves when they fall short. In brief, the normal quest for excellence can be growthful and beneficial to individuals and society as a whole, whereas the compulsive drive for perfection is always debilitating and pathological.

Those prone to perfectionism are characterized

by certain dysfunctional ways of thinking, or cognitive styles. They tend to think dichotomously, which means that they see things in a polarized fashion (e.g., in either-or, black-or-white, always-or-never terms). Such a cognitive style leads easily to the tendency to overgeneralize (e.g., concluding from one job failure that one is fated to fail forever). Furthermore, perfectionists are frequently victims of what Karen Horney termed the "tyranny of the shoulds." Possessing an overly active system of self-commands, their consciousness is swamped by "I should" statements. Common examples of such inner dictates are: "I should be the perfect parent (or teacher, or spouse)"; "I should never get angry"; "I should always do the right thing"; "I should always know the right answer." Finally, perfectionists have little compassion for themselves and are harshly self-critical and overly self-evaluative.

RELIGIOUS CONDITIONING

While the perfectionistic attitude is so remarkably widespread that it can be seen as a cultural phenomenon, it is strongly reinforced for Christians by certain religious factors. First, the biblical injunction to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) has through the ages given Christians the impression that holiness consists in being a flawless paragon of virtue.

Second, expectations for perfection are often intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously, communicated to Christian churchgoers. Psychologists D. Louise Mebane and Charles Ridley argue that "often an unrealistic and unbiblical message of how to live the 'Christian life' is sent in the church":

> If pastors intend for their behavior to be modeled, it is understandable that only their best behaviors and accomplishments are openly displayed. The outcome is that pastoral perfection is modeled to imperfect parishioners. . . . The potent message sent is "you need to be a perfect Christian." The attending assumption is the need to be completely successful or competent especially in overcoming all personal struggles and limitations.

This message creates a mentality that equates spirituality with perfection. If being imperfect is tantamount to being unspiritual, then avoiding imperfection becomes a goal of Christian life. To be a good Christian then requires that one's personal struggles and temptations be hidden from others and often even from oneself as well.

While some pastors have a proclivity for expecting perfection of people, the sending of perfectionistic expectations is a two-way street because parishioners often send messages that the pastor should be perfect. By pedestalizing priests and ministers, the congregation often imposes perfectionistic standards on those who serve them in leadership. Vulnerability to perfectionism is compounded when ministers have internalized saintly expectations for themselves. The priest whose principal role-image consists in being an *alter Christus* (another Christ), and who has this self-image reinforced by people who revere him and see him hierarchically just below God, illustrates the complex dynamics operating in perfectionism.

A third factor that makes Christians particularly vulnerable to perfectionism is the rhetoric of religious life. For example, in Jesuit documents there is an exhortation to strive always for the *magis* (more) and to do everything *ad majorem Dei gloriam* (for the greater glory of God). Sisters of St. Joseph are given a hundred "maxims of perfection" to follow. Also held up for emulation have been young and idealistic saints such as St. Stanislaus Kostka, whose motto was *Ad majora natus sum* (I was born for greater things). Without necessarily intending to, users of this kind of exhortatory language can instill in people a sense that what they have accomplished is never enough, that more needs always to be done. The underlying message of much traditional hagiography is that the push for perfection is what saints are made of. Commenting on St. John Berchmans after the saint's death, his rector wrote: "What we universally admired in him was that in all the virtues he showed himself perfect and that, with the aid of divine grace to which he responded to his utmost, he performed all his actions with all the perfection that can be imagined."

SYMPTOMS OF PERFECTIONISM

The manifestations of perfectionism are multiple. Prominent among them are depression and low self-esteem, procrastination, obsessive-compulsive behavior, fear of failure, troubled relationships, poor self-control, and addictive behavior. Because many people are reluctant to admit that they have been tinged, if not tainted, by perfectionism, it is important to recognize these more obvious symptoms.

Depression and Lowered Self-Esteem. Clinical evidence suggests that there is an important connection between perfectionistic attitudes and depressive psychopathology. Perfectionism predisposes people to painful mood swings; as David Burns writes, perfectionists "are likely to respond to the perception of failure or inadequacy with a precipitous loss in self-esteem that can trigger episodes of severe depression and anxiety." Thus, repeated recognition of a gap between performance and grandiose expectations often leads to lowered self-esteem and depression. Because perfectionists believe that failure automatically reduces their self-worth, they feel compelled to be even more perfect to avoid future failure. A study of the pathological

thought and dynamics of perfectionism done by psychologist Michael Pirot explains how a vicious self-defeating cycle operates with perfectionists: their distorted belief that they have to be perfect in order to feel good about themselves sets them up for failure, which leads to self-condemnation, lowered self-acceptance, and depression, resulting in renewed efforts to be perfect.

Procrastination. Hounded by doubts that their efforts will ever achieve the flawless results that they desire, perfectionists often procrastinate. By so doing, they both avoid the dreaded consequences of less-than-perfect performance and express the paralyzing helplessness that unrealistic expectations cause.

Obsessive-Compulsive Behavior. Perfectionism is a major feature in obsessive-compulsive and mood disorders. The obsessiveness of perfectionists manifests itself in excessive rumination over past mistakes and a debilitating preoccupation with possible slip-ups in the future. The compulsive quality in perfectionism is revealed in the strained effort and drivenness that easily lead to exhaustion and burnout.

Fear of Failure. Often people will confess that their perfectionistic tendencies inhibit them from taking risks and trying new things. Like the straight-A student who concludes from one B grade that she is a total failure (either-or mentality), perfectionists fear and overreact to mistakes. Anticipating that mistakes will lead to rejection, they become preoccupied with being "safe." Thus, fear of failure and an obsessional desire for perfection become emotional barriers to learning and creativity and prevent perfectionists from pursuing areas of learning in which there is no guarantee of perfect mastery.

Troubled Relationships. Research indicates that perfectionists suffer from loneliness and disturbed personal relationships. Several factors may account for this. First, they tend to react defensively to criticism because they fear that others will reject them when they inevitably fall short of their own unrealistic standards. This lack of openness to negative feedback usually frustrates others and, ironically, results in the very disapproval that perfectionists most fear. Second, as Burns notes, their concern with appearing inadequate gives rise to "a disclosure phobia that causes them to resist sharing their inner thoughts and feelings." Naturally, such resistance to self-disclosure inhibits intimate communication and cuts them off from the kind of warm, unconditional acceptance that can come through deep friendships but never through accomplishments. Third, friction arises in perfectionists' relationships when they impose their unreasonable standards on others. When others inevitably disappoint them, perfectionists feel annoyed and angry. The stage is set for ongoing conflict and exasperation because others respond to perfectionists' demands with resentment and resistance.

Poor Self-Control. In adopting programs for self-management (e.g., diets or exercise regimens) that are excessively rigorous, perfectionists set themselves up for failure. This rigid self-control deteriorates, writes Ben Sorotzkin, when "the first lapse in the perfectionist's typically overambitious program is viewed as indicating total failure, which usually results in binge smoking, drinking, or eating (the 'saint or sinner' syndrome)." Dichotomous and overgeneralized thinking contributes to the poor self-control that perfectionists manifest in areas such as eating, drinking, and exercising. One of the ironies of perfectionism is that when perfectionists fail in perfect self-control, they lose all self-control. The wisdom of one of the Weight Watchers mottoes, "Progress, not perfection," reflects this insight.

PERFECTION AS A SPIRITUAL LONGING

Jung believed that the human soul has an inborn need for God that is as powerful and urgent as the instinct for food and drink. This religious urge, which directs us toward God, must be satisfied if we are to be psychologically healthy. When this fundamental function of the psyche is blocked, we create false gods and give ourselves over to them to the detriment of an authentic spiritual life. In her book *Addiction to Perfection*, Jungian analyst Marion Woodman suggests that striving for perfection

The rhetoric of religious life makes Christians particularly vulnerable to perfectionism

is an attempt to meet this religious need, albeit through a counterfeit spirituality. The addict is trying to unite with God but seeks this union through a material or created substance. This is the condition of many people today who no longer have a living connection to a faith life that can mediate their spiritual longings. The image of "the perfect," which was once projected onto God, is now projected onto a human being or onto a substance (e.g., food, alcohol, sex). Because the object of addiction now carries a numinous or holy quality, the addict becomes obsessed with it, desiring it above all else.

Woodman sees the addiction to perfection as stemming from a cultural overemphasis on the masculine principle and suppression of the feminine. "Essentially I am suggesting," states Woodman, "that many of us—men and women—are addicted in one way or another because our patriarchal culture emphasizes specialization and perfection. Driven to do our best at school, on the job, in our relationships—in every corner of our lives—we try to make ourselves into works of art. Working so hard to create our own perfection we forget that we are human beings." In short, Woodman relates perfectionism to the domination of masculine consciousness. The masculine principle, symbolized by the head, values rationality, power, and perfection, while the feminine, symbolized by the heart, cherishes feeling, relatedness, and mystery. The core spiritual issue in our culture today, according to Woodman, is "How do goal-oriented perfectionists find their way back to the lost relationship to their own heart?"

ROOTS OF PERFECTIONISM

The seeds of perfectionism are planted early in the human psyche. A variety of theories exist to explain how this occurs. Cognitive psychologist Phyllis Beck believes that perfection is the result of irrational thinking patterns that lead to self-defeating behaviors and emotions. In general, cognitive theories suggest the possibility that children may develop perfectionistic tendencies by interacting with adults who are perfectionistic. Carl Jung believed that the image of perfection is present at birth—that there is an archetype of perfection, like a platonic form, in the human (collective) unconscious that acts as an instinct driving us toward perfection. Alfred Adler postulated that a "will to superiority" develops in order to compensate for a sense of inferiority. He later revised this notion and explained it as a "striving for perfection," which could be pathological or healthy, depending on the motive underlying it. If the motive is personal security it is a neurotic or pathological striving. If the motive is religious—that is, to serve others out of a sense of social interest and responsibility—it is healthy. Erik Erikson believed that the onset of perfectionism can occur in the elementary school years, when children are in the "industry versus inferiority" stage of development. Children who do not experience success in the variety of school and home tasks expected of them develop a hypersensitivity to imperfection because they conclude that their flawed performance makes them inferior. Feeling that they have disappointed the expectations of parents and teachers, they are driven to win adult approval by performing perfectly.

In general, psychoanalytic theories view perfectionism as the result of a harsh superego. Theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Harry Stack Sullivan, and Karen Horney suggest that children from homes in which parents are critical and unpredictable feel great anxiety and hostility. Perfectionism becomes a way of coping with such feelings because it allows the child to convert threatening emotions and impulses into behaviors that will be more acceptable to the parents and thus win the love and approval for which the child longs.

THE TYRANNY OF THE SHOULDS

Horney's notion of the "tyranny of the shoulds" is perhaps the most useful of the theories cited in terms of explaining the dynamics of perfectionism. In *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, Horney states that perfectionism originates as a coping device adopted by children who unfortunately have to "fight against the action of neurotic parents" who are unable to provide the affirmation and approval that children need to develop a positive sense of self. Perceiving their parents as withholding and unloving, unaffirmed children feel not only deep self-doubt but also intense anxiety and hostility, which they suppress because they fear retaliation. These "bad" feelings are directed inward against the self and, because children equate feeling bad with being bad, create a sense of self that is "not good enough." Feeling helpless and intimidated in the face of parents who are perceived as both all-powerful and hostile, such children learn to accommodate. Specifically, the accommodation takes the form of the development of a better or idealized self to replace the actual self, which has been judged "not good enough." To make up for deep feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, they unconsciously create a glorified image of themselves that they endow with inflated and unlimited powers. Eventually, they come to identify with this grandiose image. Horney describes how this leads to the emergence of "the tyranny of the shoulds" in the neurotic personality:

> The neurotic sets to work to mold himself into a supreme being of his own making. He holds before his soul his image of perfection and unconsciously tells himself "Forget about the disgraceful creature you actually are; this is how you should be; and to be this idealized self is all that matters. You should be able to

endure everything, to understand everything, to like everybody, to be always productive"—to mention only a few of these inner dictates. Since they are inexorable, I call them "the tyranny of the shoulds."

NARCISSISTIC PERFECTIONISM

Thus far what has been discussed is what psychologists refer to as neurotic perfectionism. There is, however, another form of perfectionism that differs not only in etiology but also in meaning. It has been called narcissistic perfectionism. A spiritual director or therapist who is trying to help a person overcome perfectionistic tendencies must be able to distinguish between the two types because the treatment approach for each is quite different. Theoretically, neurotic perfectionists are individuals who have a stable and cohesive sense of self that is relatively independent of outside influences. In other words, they possess a sense of identity that is separate and distinct from parents and others, and experience themselves as autonomous moral agents. Their perfectionism is a consequence of trying to live up to the demands of a harsh superego that punishes them with guilt and loss of self-esteem when they fail to comply perfectly to its "shoulds."

On the other hand, narcissistic perfectionists have a poorly defined and weakly differentiated self. Because they lack a stable inner core, their sense of who they are is fragile, forcing them to rely on others' attention and admiration for their self-esteem. Like a barometer, their vulnerable self-esteem rises and falls, fluctuating between feelings of inferiority and superiority. When a significant person registers disapproval or criticism, narcissistic perfectionists feel defective; when praised or admired, they experience a grandiose or inflated sense of self. Instead of the guilt that neurotic perfectionists feel whenever they fail, narcissistic perfectionists experience the crippling shame that is symptomatic of very early emotional wounding. While the former are upset about *performing* badly, the latter believe that they themselves *are* bad. According to Ben Sorotzkin, writing in *Psychology* (Fall 1985), "the shame-prone individual would be obsessed with the question, 'How could *I* have done that?' whereas the guilt-ridden person is more likely to wonder, 'How could I have *done that?*'"

The "tyranny of the shoulds" of the narcissistic perfectionist focuses on the self ("I should be perfect"). The failure to live up to the dictates of the "shoulds" evokes thoughts of "I am worthless," "I am a nobody" (shame). In contrast, the focal point of the neurotic individual's "should" is the action to be done or not done ("I should *never get angry*"). The failure to live up to this expectation evokes thoughts of "I am bad" (guilt).

In short, narcissistic people are perfectionistic because their fragile self-esteem requires the reinforcing admiration of others. The very fabric of the narcissistic self is held together by perfection; thus, failure is devastating. In contrast, neurotic perfectionism is related to morals and ideals. Neurotics slip into perfectionism because of their compulsion to obey the dictates of a demanding superego.

It is important for the spiritual director or therapist to distinguish between neurotic and narcissistic perfectionism

Although real-life perfectionists usually have both neurotic and narcissistic aspects, it is important to keep this distinction in mind when working with perfectionists in counseling or spiritual direction. In the case of neurotic perfectionism, helpers need to assist clients in examining and modifying their excessively high ideals, bringing them into line with what is more humanly possible. The goal here is the gradual transformation of a harsh superego into a healthy moral conscience. This approach, however, would be too threatening to those whose perfectionism is more narcissistic in nature because "being perfect" is the glue that holds their identity intact. A more fruitful approach in such cases involves the development of a healthy, differentiated sense of self, capable of self-love and self-direction. Narcissistic perfectionists need to be continually reassured about their own goodness, since this is what was lacking in their early lives. An outgrowth of such remedial ego-formation would be the gradual defining of morals and ideals that are personal and internalized.

Helpers can unwittingly fail to provide adequate and accurate empathy when they do not properly distinguish between these two types of perfectionism. Challenging narcissistic perfectionists on their perfectionism is counterproductive because it is experienced as an attack on the self and, as such, a painful rejection. Neurotics, however, are well-

served by empathic confrontation regarding their severe and unrealistic demands. As in all helping relationships, empathic attunement is at the heart of healing and transformation.

SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE

As a spiritual affliction, perfectionism can weaken the very foundation of one's spiritual life by corroding one's self-acceptance. Self-acceptance is foundational to faith because, as theologian Johannes Metz has so wisely warned, sinful flight from God starts in one's flight from oneself. Self-rejection easily leads to a rejection of God. Discontented with who and what they are, perfectionists cannot value life as a worthwhile gift from a generous Creator and so are not moved to respond to God with warmth and gratitude. At times their response may even be one of resentment and bitterness, fueled by envious hatred of others, whom they perceive as having been dealt a better hand. Ingratitude results when one's special creation by God is not seen as the gracious act of divine love that it is. Struggling with an abiding sense that they are never good enough, perfectionists can slip into a self-hatred that not only blocks them from loving others but also alienates them from God. In this way self-dissatisfaction mars their relationship with the self's Maker.

Self-acceptance for Christians cannot be a selective process whereby some aspects of the self are claimed as good while others are discarded as undesirable. For self-rejecting perfectionists, the spiritual challenge is twofold. First, they need to embrace the fullness of who they are as persons uniquely fashioned by God. This means overcoming the tendency toward selective self-acceptance. Second, they need to grow in a conviction based on faith that God's love for them is total and without regard for the flaws and limitations of which they are ashamed. Ultimately, spiritual growth occurs when we are graced with a felt knowledge or an emotional realization of our radical goodness and lovableness in the midst of our imperfection.

PERFECTIONISM AND PRIDE

Perfectionists easily fall prey to the sin of self-righteousness because unconsciously they seek, Phariseelike, to establish themselves with God on the basis of their achievements. In other words, they try to earn salvation through their good works rather than receive salvation as an unearned gift. When tempted to gain God's favor through our own religious practice and works, we need to recall that God's approval is freely given, without regard to human merit and despite human demerit. That unmerited favor is lavished on all is the essence of the Good News preached by Jesus.

Another way that pride is revealed in the attitudes of perfectionists is evident in their harsh self-condemnation when their performance fails to meet their unrealistic expectations. In a study of first-year law students, Beck and Burns reported that 80 percent of them needed counseling for anxiety and depression. The majority of these students exhibited perfectionistic tendencies that made them angry, depressed, frustrated, and panicky when they were not at the top or near the top of their class. Accustomed to being first in their undergraduate years, these high achievers were psychologically unprepared for the "average-student" role into which the more selective and competitive environment of law school placed them. In their perfectionism, they condemned themselves as second-rate or as losers. This study illustrates how the excessively high standards of perfectionists can mask an implicit claim to superiority and an unwillingness to accept being ordinary. In treating perfectionists who are heavily defended against recognizing this subtle form of pride, psychologist Richard Driscoll recommends intervening with such statements as "Holding such high standards is your way of saying, 'Nothing that I could ever do would be good enough for someone as superior as myself,'" or "When you make a mistake, say to yourself 'I feel I am too good to make mistakes like other people.'" This form of intervention is based on the premise that seeing their self-condemnation as a fraudulent claim to superiority will give perfectionists a reason to stop it.

PERFECTION FOR A CHRISTIAN

The project of maintaining superiority in all things, combined with the obsession with mistakes, can so consume the attention and energy of perfectionists that they become narrowly focused on themselves. Like a whirlpool, perfectionism sucks people into a hole of self-preoccupation. Because perfectionists identify their worth with their performance, their activities become the mirror into which they gaze with narcissistic preoccupation, searching anxiously for reflections that will reassure them of their self-worth.

A self-absorbing pursuit of perfection has at times been fostered by a commonly misunderstood and misused exhortation of Jesus that Christians should "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Taken out of context, this passage has served as the basis on which Christians were urged to strive for individualistic moral perfection, to be flawless in thoughts, words, and deeds. If to be true followers of Christ necessitates embodying the perfection of God, it is no wonder that the pursuit of perfection has often resulted in fear, hypocrisy, and legalism. Perfection, defined as errorlessness, is a human impossibility. Yet it has masqueraded for centuries as the nature of true Christian holiness. When this biblical injunction is

understood in its context, a very different image of Christian perfection emerges.

This well-known saying is taken from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. It is immediately preceded by a description of God, who "makes the sun rise on the evil and the good" (5:45) and castigates those who love only people who love them. Thus, as William Spohn, S.J., points out in *America* (March 3, 1990), the context indicates that Jesus exhorts his followers "to imitate God by loving without distinction, not by becoming perfect paragons of virtue." In other words, we are called to imitate God's indiscriminate and inclusive love, a love that causes God to let the sun rise on the bad as well as the good and to allow the rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike. Thus, the passage does not advocate the pursuit of perfection as a striving for individual moral perfection; instead, it advocates a lifelong stretching of one's capacity to love as God does.

The Greek word used by Matthew for "perfect" is *teleios*. According to scripture scholar William Barclay, the term has nothing to do with what might be called abstract, philosophical, metaphysical perfection. Rather, a thing is *teleios* if it realizes the purpose for which it was planned or created. Matthew (5:48) makes clear that Christian holiness consists in being godlike. As Barclay writes in his book *The Gospel of Matthew*, "The one thing which makes us like God is the love which never ceases to care for [people], no matter what [they] do to it. . . . We enter upon Christian perfection, when we learn to forgive as God forgives, and to love as God loves."

When the focus of Christian holiness is kept on the ongoing development of the capacity to love others as God does, the danger of self-absorption is minimized. When, however, the Christian ideal is seen as the perfect attainment of virtues, a radically different focus emerges. Concentrating on a life of faultless obedience and spotless virtue keeps Christians focused on their own scorecard of good works rather than on the quality of their relationships. The life that the New Testament portrays as the proper response to God's generous gift of love is focused, according to Spohn, not on the pursuit of individual excellence through perfectionistic obedience but on a sincere imitation of Christ, whose life centered on love for the Father and service to those in need. "Too often the pursuit of perfection," states Spohn, "becomes more concerned with the servant than with those who need to be served. In the New Testament, gratitude and compassion, not the drive for perfection, channel Christian commitment into action."

PERFECTIONISM AND THE SHADOW

Striving for Christian perfection does not mean a denial and rejection of the negative aspects of the personality. Nor does it legitimate the disowning of the "shadow"—that is, those aspects of the person that are buried in the unconscious for the sake of maintaining an acceptable outer appearance. In *Aion*, Jung makes the important point that "there is a considerable difference between *perfection* and *completeness*. . . . The individual may strive after perfection . . . but must suffer from the opposite of his intentions for the sake of his completeness." Perfection belongs to God, while completeness or wholeness is all that human beings can hope for. Jung's thinking on this issue coincides with the gospel: for Matthew *teleios* does not mean being perfect in the sense of being flawless; rather, it means moving toward the human goal of wholeness or completeness.

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Getting to know our shadow aspects and gradually integrating them into our conscious identity is a way to wholeness. It also frees us from the need to be perfect. Integration, in the Jungian sense, does not mean license to sin or to act out our negative emotions without regard for the needs of others. Rather, it enables us to realize our potential for doing harm and thereby makes us more responsible in relating to others. As imperfect beings we will always be sinful and thus hurtful, both to ourselves and others. But knowing this and recognizing our own personal pitfalls gives us the courage to acknowledge and repair the harm that we do. Such intimate self-knowledge is the cornerstone of compassionate growth toward wholeness. When our desire to be whole replaces our need to be perfect, perfectionism is no longer a driving force.

PERFECTIONISM HINDERS MINISTRY

Striving for perfection can be an obstacle to effective ministry. The obsessive-compulsive aspect

of perfectionism drives many ministers to overwork, often resulting in the state of chronic fatigue popularly known as burnout. Ironically, ministers who strain to do everything perfectly jeopardize their performance in several ways. First, severe and continual pressure leads to exhaustion and eventually to a distaste for their work, and thus to poor performance. To improve effectiveness, those who find themselves ministering compulsively are challenged not to care less passionately about their work but to relax their efforts and to be gently accepting of themselves when they fall short. Second, because effective ministry today requires collaboration, perfectionists are handicapped by their inability to work with others. Already tired and cramped for time, perfectionistic ministers find that meetings, an essential component of collaboration, become a nuisance, and collaborating with others undesirable. Third, perfectionists, fearing that things will not get done properly, are reluctant to delegate tasks. The inability to trust in colleagues and the compulsion for perfection isolate ministers in such a way that eventually they function as lone rangers rather than as team members.

Perfectionistic ministers also have a negative impact on others when they, like the Pharisees, lay heavy burdens on the people whom they serve. Horney describes how the drive for perfection is externalized and imposed on others: "[This] person may primarily impose his standards upon others and make relentless demands as to their perfection. The more he feels himself the measure of all things, the more he insists—not upon general perfection but upon his particular norms being measured up to. The failure of others to do so arouses his contempt or anger." Horney's words can serve as a warning to ministers who tend to impose unconscionable expectations on parishioners, thus compounding the problems of people who come to them for counseling. Perfection-prone people who seek help in their struggles are best served not by ministers who reinforce their compulsion but by those who can help them understand their limitations and accept their humanness.

THE PERFECT ARE IMPERFECT

To embrace our existence as human beings in its dimension of weakness can be life-giving in that it helps counter the myth of perfectionism, so carefully cultivated in the days before Vatican II. It can help us come to grips with the normalcy of our own limitations and failings and to realize that we, like Mary Magdalene, will receive God's compassionate acceptance—not because we are perfect but because we have loved much. We are encouraged to trust in God's great love for us, implicit in St. Francis De Sales's conviction that "to get up after a fall, over and over again, [is] more pleasing to God than if we did not fall." It is human nature to be imperfect. In truth, the only way a person can be perfect is to be imperfect. We are invited to humbly acknowledge our finite human condition, placing our confidence in God's unconditional love for us. As Adrian van Kaam puts it in *Religion and Personality*, "The Lord will never ask how successful we were in overcoming a particular vice, sin, or imperfection. . . . Success and failure are accidental. The joy of the Christian is never based on [one's] personal religious success but on the knowledge that [one's] Redeemer lives." As a bumper sticker succinctly reminds us, "Christians are not perfect; they're just forgiven."

RECOMMENDED READING

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