



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of
the Southern United States

The Monthly Message
to the Priests' Wives
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The Tender Mercy

Most of the physicians, nurses and all those involved in careers requiring dealing with people's problems and sufferings, whether physical or psychological, are exposed to what is called **Empathy Fatigue** in which one gradually loses his ability to empathize with others and becomes numb regarding their problems and sufferings. Usually this person shows in the beginning of his career a lot of compassion, empathy and understanding but after a certain period of continuous exposure to people's pain and suffering he gradually becomes desensitized regarding their

pain and agony and his emotions towards them dry up.

The same thing applies more to the priest, his wife and any servant in general. It is well known that the first years of service are the most ones full of zeal, activity and empathy with those who are in agony. But after the passage of many years in ministry the served person turns from being **“a suffering human being”** into a **“titled case”**: this is a case of conversion, this one is a case of separation, that one is a case of addiction...etc. Therefore, the servant loses gradually the “tender mercy of God” due to the vast amount of groans and complaints that fills his ears. While he gets involved in a problem in order to give help, he deals with the one who has the problem in a void automatic way, not as a human being who deals with another human being in a vivid dynamic way.

He looks then like a carpenter who deals with an inanimate broken piece of furniture to fix it.

Among the many signs of empathy fatigue are the following:

- 1) Visible change in the ability of the servant to empathize with the ones he serves.
- 2) Dryness and bluntness of emotions towards the served people that may amount sometimes to the degree of cruelty of heart.
- 3) Boredom, grumbles and complaints from service.
- 4) Reluctance and foot-dragging regarding the tasks one is required to perform at service.
- 5) Cold and lukewarm interpersonal relationships in general.

The most eminent **example in the Holy Bible** about this empathy fatigue is the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan where

it was said about the one: *“And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side”* (Luke 10:31) and about the other: *“When he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side”* (Luke 10:32). Another example is the ruler of the synagogue who said to the multitude of ill people: *“There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore, come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day”* (Luke 13:14)

As for **the Lord Jesus Christ**, He never lost even for a while his tender mercy towards the afflicted, the epileptics and the sinners. He, about whom we say: **“He became man”**, dealt with a fully humanized way with every person with neither dryness of His compassion and empathy nor bluntness of His emotions towards the sufferings of humanity even when He was in the utmost sufferings of crucifixion. If the Holy Bible says about God that *“In all their affliction He was*

afflicted” (Isaiah 63:9), then the human mind cannot imagine the amount of empathy and sharing God shows to humanity in its sufferings and tribulations since Adam till the last age with neither dryness of His tender mercy nor aridness of the flow of His compassion.

Of course, a priest’s wife must be subjected to this type of empathy fatigue as she is a servant in general and a priest’s wife in specific. **She is a witness of the sufferings and afflictions of many people** including those of the clergy in general and of her husband priest in specific. Therefore, she must take some precautions to avoid getting into this fatigue:

- 1) A service guided by the Holy Spirit puts the burden of pain, shared by the servant with the ones he serves, upon the Holy Spirit through prayers. But a service guided by the

ego puts the burden of these pains upon the servant’s nerves and psyche.

- 2) A servant must be keen to take some periods of retreat from time to time in order to renew his spiritual, psychological and physical energies.
- 3) A servant must continuously remind himself that while he serves the afflicted people he is actually serving the afflicted Christ in person. Therefore, his tender mercy remains always kindled and effective.
- 4) *“To whom little is forgiven, the same loves little”* (Luke 7:47). Therefore, it is impossible for a servant, who puts his sins before his eyes with all humbleness and gratitude to God who forgave them all, to deal with those he serves with cruelty and bluntness.