



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
Monthly Message for the Priests Wives
July 2021

Overwhelmed

My Dearest Sister in Christ,

I don't know about you, but my schedule this summer is drowning me. After a relatively quiet summer last year (thank you, pandemic), camp service obligations have made these months completely overwhelming. We serve in very active ways throughout the week, and, at its end, when we're most exhausted, we have our regular Sunday service.

Add to that graduation parties, baptisms, weddings, birthdays of both the usual and otherworldly level, and trying to have coffee with every person we haven't seen in 18 months, and we have the perfect recipe for burnout.

How can we fight the feeling of being overwhelmed?

Usually people give the big, long-term advice: learn to say no, set healthy boundaries, take care of yourself. In this letter, dear sister, I want to offer the small advice, what to do right this second to fight feeling overwhelmed.

Sometimes we are just stuck in it—all the obligations—and we simply need to survive the day or the week. We'll change our bad habits next week; let's first worry about the now.

RECONNECT WITH GOD

A friend of mine recently pointed out that the feeling of being overwhelmed begins at its root with a disconnect from God. Perhaps we haven't been keeping up with our canons as well as we'd like? That's the first step—reconnecting with God.

The biggest blessing of being a Christian (besides salvation, eternal life, etc.) is that God is always near. God dwells within us. So, He is not hard to find. Retire to a private space. Breathe. Clear your mind. Turn to God in prayer and ask for support.

When I'm overwhelmed with tasks, I sometimes find myself whispering Psalm 31: "In You, O Lord, I put my trust. Let me never be put to shame." Unlike King David, I don't have a bloody battle to fight. Just a war with my to-do list. The scars are all mental and emotional.

God is always found in the present moment. We don't have to schedule a future quiet time to connect with Him now.

WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING ON YOUR MIND

Once you've done that, the next step is deceptively simple. Write down everything on your mind. List all of the tasks and obligations that are weighing you down. Don't just think of these tasks. Take out a piece of paper and write them all down. Don't skimp on this. Really empty your head. Write down every single task on your mind.

Sometimes it helps me to divide things into domains. What tasks do I have for work? What tasks for the home? What tasks for service? What favors have I promised others? What tasks do I want to do for me?

For many people, this step alone begins to reduce the feeling of burnout. Looking objectively at the tasks on your list might reveal that there isn't all that much. It just seemed like a lot when it was floating in your head. You might look down at the list and find that it's doable.

On the other hand, it might be one of those weeks where the tasks really are too much.

COUNT THE COST (IN MINUTES)

For the next step, I think of the verse in the Gospel of St. Luke where Christ says, *"For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it— lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him"* (Luke 14:28-29). It's time to count the cost—not in dollars but in minutes—of all the tasks on your list.

Go through everything on the list and write beside it the approximate time it will take to complete the task. I have found, shockingly, when I do this, that sometimes I have put more tasks than there are available working hours in my life. (This likely explains many of my problems.) It's time to assess the tasks.

I have found it very helpful to remind myself that I don't HAVE to do anything. All of the items on my list are optional. Yes, really. **You don't have to do anything.**

Ever since I learned this trick, I have let go of a lot of bitterness and resentment in my life. Making everything optional reminds me that I am in control of life, and I have the ultimate authority with every task I do. There are consequences to doing or not doing something, but ultimately, I get to decide which consequences matter.

For example, if someone asks me to go to their child's baptism, I could decide they are infringing on my time and that I am only going out of social obligation. As the week closes and we approach Sunday, I get more and more annoyed about it.

Or I could decide that I am CHOOSING to be there for their special moment, that I'm there because I love this child, and that I'm looking forward to watching her grow for the next 18 years. What a difference having a choice makes!

ELIMINATE, DELEGATE AND POSTPONE

Looking at it with this in mind, mark out all the things that you actually don't have to do. So often we put things on our list as "must-do" when they really do not need to be done. Get rid of those things.

Then, circle all the things that someone else can do. Remember that Christ did not take on the task of personally baptizing the believers—He sent his disciples out for that! If Jesus can delegate, so can you. (We should embroider that on a pillow.)

Is there something your husband, your children, your neighbor, or your friend can take on instead? Is there something that's really someone else's job that you can assign back to them? We sometimes get caught in the "Tasoni, can you... ?" trap. No, tasoni cannot. Give that person his or her task back!

Next, push back things that can be done later without added stress to you. Some items seem urgent when it's really our own pressure that makes them so. Some tasks can be postponed safely. The baby book you haven't made yet can wait another year or two.

ASSESS THE TASKS AGAIN WITH A SPIRIT OF HUMILITY

Also, dear sister (and please hear it in the gentle tone it is said), sometimes we confuse a spirit of service with our own ego. It is not sinful to be human, to have limited time, energy, and abilities and to make choices, sometimes tough ones, how we will allot those resources. You are not under obligation to be superhuman, to save everyone and every situation. Go back to your list and re-assess. What things are you holding on to out of ego instead of the humility of service? Get rid of them or delegate them.

PICK ONE THING AND START

Now we come to the fun part. The part where momentum happens, where things actually get crossed off the list because we did them!

Pick one thing from your list that you are willing and able to do right now. It doesn't have to be something big. It can be something very small. It could even be as small as responding to one e-mail.

If all your tasks seem big and you aren't sure how to break them down, instead set a timer for 15 minutes to begin working on one thing. You might find that it's done in that time period or that you're re-energized and able to continue until that task is done.

The only way to get remaining tasks off your plate is to do them. But for now, just do the next right thing, the easiest thing that will get you working again without feeling overwhelmed. Putting our hand to the plow is sometimes half the battle!

Then we will say with the psalmist: "But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in Your hand" (Psalm 31:14-15a).

Your sister in Christ,

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