

Do You Want a Generalist or a Specialist?

Once there was a bishop, who, to prepare his priests for his successor, called them all together. He asked them to help him in giving the synod recommendations for the selection. He asked his priests what qualities his successor would need to have to be a good bishop of their diocese. Some priests said he needed to be a father figure, and others said he needed to be a brother to his priests. They made practical suggestions: he needs to know finance and canon law. Some thought he should be young, full of energy, and others thought he should be old and filled with experience. As the list was completed, the bishop looked out among his priests and said, can you think of anyone in the whole world that meets all of these qualities. Of course, the answer was "no," but it gave the priests an idea of how difficult the selection of a bishop is.

I have a friend who has moved to a new state and so he had to get new doctors that accepted his health plan. First, he needed a primary care physician. That doctor would help him select his eight specialists. It seems everything in medicine is specialized. Even the neighborhood physician is usually either an internist who has a background in diagnosis or a family care physician who has a broad base of knowledge. It reminds me of a mother whose son fell from his bike, and down the street, there was a woman who had M.D. after her name. The mother knocked, and the boy held out his arm. The mother asked, "Is it broken, and do I have to go to the ER?" The doctor responded, "I think you should go to the ER because I'm a psychiatrist, and it's been a long time since someone asked me to examine a wrist."

One of the difficult jobs of a bishop is selecting a priest for a parish. The bishop gets advice from other priests and possibly laity. Usually, the priest leaving will give the bishop a sense of what the parish is, which tells the ordinary what kind of priest that parish needs.

Priests are like doctors. Doctors become specialists in particular medical fields because of knowledge, but more so because of their love of what they're practicing.

We may like our neighborhood doctor because he or she always seems to know what is wrong with us. But when we need a surgeon, we don't go to our neighborhood doctor no matter how much we like and respect their abilities. So when a bishop selects a pastor for a parish, he needs to know what the parish needs. Like doctors, pastors are not all neighborhood physicians, some are specialists. We have lots of specialties in the Church. We need Canon lawyers to help run a diocese and also provide people with care when their marriages have come to an end. We need liturgists who can, because of their love of our liturgy, provide beautiful services in their churches and help other priests do the same. We need priests that are administrators because parishes are a business. They have finances, which means bills are to be paid, and they need someone to handle the maintenance making sure snow is removed, and the grass is cut. At one time in the Church, the priests would come together with different specialties and run a parish. This was usually the case with monastery-run parishes. One priest might be in charge of the sick and dying. At the same time, an-

other would handle the administration, and still another, maintenance. As time moves on, religious order priests are decreasing, and diocesan priests are decreasing in number, too. All priests now, no matter what specialty they love, have to work in a parish. So, like the surgeon who helps out or covers a small town, a priest who is a liturgist may be a pastor.

In the medical field, as the number of doctors decreased, they created two new specialties. The first is the hospitalist, and the second is the generalist. The hospitalist takes care of the patient either in the emergency room or upon admission into the hospital. They make sure that the appropriate medical care is given according to the direction of the specialists because there are not enough specialists to go around. So, they can handle a person who was getting ready for kidney surgery and their roommate, who is there with stage IV cancer. The generalist is the one in a practice in the neighborhood. They go in a different direction than the family care physician, but they usually work with one. That way, no matter how complicated the illness is, they can formulate a health plan. They are the bridge between family care and the hospital.

How does this example relate to the Church? In the Church, priests may be specialists because of their knowledge and because of their love of law, scripture, liturgy, moral theology, catechesis, to name a few. But a priest is needed in a parish, and so there they go. Very few priests are generalists. These are the priests we'll have a well-rounded training and can cover a variety of ministries from religious education to care of the dying with a professional expertise. They know that they will need information from the specialist to do those things well. They know just enough Canon Law to tell people what documents they need to get together for an annulment. They know just enough liturgy not to embarrass themselves at the altar.

All priests today are called to be a generalist with enough scripture to preach and teach, with enough liturgy to celebrate, with enough pastoral care to take care of the sick and dying, with enough moral theology to hear confessions; with enough skills to handle religious education and youth ministry. But we need those specialist priests to help them, so we need some priests to get advanced education in the theological fields so that they can guide the other priests. So, in conclusion, in today's contemporary, when you get a priest in your parish, he's probably not a generalist but a specialist. Do not expect your priest to do everything well. Plus, he may not be young enough to have an endless source of energy or old enough to have wisdom, because no one has both. Therefore, do not criticize your priest for his lack of skills but look to helping him find the people who can share their skills with him. No priest is perfect. No bishop is perfect, but both of them have been called by God to serve.

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