

The Thin Line: Empathy vs. Sympathy

Decades ago I had a Curate who was sick a great deal of the time. Most people were reluctant to say, "Father, how are you?" They didn't have enough time for the answer. I regularly would send him to visit people who were sick, and hours later he would have the same malady. I asked the Bishop if he had any advice for me, and he said, "Maybe he would do better as a Chaplain in a Nursing Home, so that he and the patients could have an 'organ recital'." I told him that I did not think that the priest could play a musical instrument. The Bishop responded, "That's not what I meant. I mean he and the patients could be together and recite to each other the organs of theirs that weren't working correctly!"

One of the great temptations in life is for us to take on the pain of the person we are trying to help. In so doing we not only can lose objectivity, but we all too often find ourselves functioning as the Savior instead of being the Saved. Only Jesus can take on the pain of the world. The Epistle to the Hebrews is clear in telling us that we have a Great High Priest who sympathizes with us. He doesn't empathize, nor does He exercise apathy – He literally has taken upon Himself the sin, the pain, and the tragedies of the world. We simply would not be able to bear that, and we have not been asked to do that by our Savior. My curate had to learn that in the midst of his great compassion for the pain of our people that he had crossed that thin line. Of course, many leaders have been told that they lack "sympathy." In fact, perhaps, they may lack the appropriate compassion – the gift of being able to console another person in pain. But our task is not to introduce our people to us as the means towards their healing. Our task is to introduce them to the Great Healer, the only Name given for health and salvation. He crossed the line from death to life and opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.