

## To Live Is To Change

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Several years ago, a quote attributed to John Cardinal Newman caught my attention: **“To live is to change. To have lived well is to have changed often.”** In a time when change is practically a theme of life – especially life in parishes, religious congregations, and church ministry – these words can bring both comfort and challenge. Their author, whose life was marked by incredible change and no little controversy, knew well the inevitability of change in life if one is faithful to the movements of grace.

The change we speak of here is not change for the sake of change. Rather, it is change in the service of the mission of Jesus and in the daily living of a commitment to the Gospel. It is the fruit of responding to the call in Deuteronomy to “choose life.” It is the basis on which individuals and groups who have committed themselves to the search for wholeness and the service of others as called for in the Gospels discern their life directions.



It is easy to resist or refuse the call to change. One can stand convinced that a current ministry is more important than a new venture. One can hold fast to the belief that one is too old or possesses too little energy to respond to the demands of change in living environment. A group can insist that its long history in a parochial setting outweighs other considerations. A religious order can maintain that its historical commitment to a particular apostolate must continue regardless of need or resources. And, in many cases, these beliefs may be true. In other instances, however, the words of Newman may provide a needed reality check: “To live is to change. To have lived well is to have changed often.”

In dealing with the reality of change, especially as religious congregations, church groups and diocesan offices encounter it, there is another quote that can also provide comfort and challenge – and great space for reflection and insight. Fr. Ray Dlugos, psychologist and CEO at Southdown, has often observed that **“Change produces stress. And stress reveals pathology.”**

Acknowledging that stress flows from the call to change is not difficult. In fact, it is quite common to hear how “stressed out” one may be as a result of the changes that a person is experiencing in his ministry situation or her congregation’s merging. The stress that flows from change is inevitable. As humans we resist change. Remember that line about inertia that we learned in general science? A body at rest tends to remain at rest unless acted on by some outside force. A body in motion tends to remain in motion unless acted on by some outside force. Our “bodies” – and our psyches – are not immune to that basic law.

It is the second part of that quote that provides the challenge to many. “Stress reveals pathology.” The pathology in question here is not typically pathology that might lead to booking a Southdown assessment or period of residential care. Rather, it is the “pathology” that reveals itself at times when we admit that we are not our best selves. It may show itself as “uncharacteristic” self-absorption of an individual at a time when concern for another is needed – perhaps when a local community is unexpectedly called to re-locate and a member seems to be caring for only herself. It may manifest itself as frenetic, controlling activity of a usually collaborative staff person when team work is needed in face of office downsizing. It may also come in the form of depressive lethargy and physical immobility when creative energy is needed to address a natural disaster. And the examples are multiple.

What is important for each is to understand that, at times of change – and especially at times of communal or organizational change – all involved will experience stress and all involved will evidence some form of behavior that is not their typical “best self.”

For individuals in the process, having an awareness of what constitutes his or her own tendency to act out can be most helpful. With that awareness, one can act to address the unmet need for safety, security or control in a manner that may not hurt or harm others. In addition to attending to their own forms of “personal pathology,” leaders in the change process can work to ensure that there is ample opportunity to name the stressors the group and/or individuals are encountering and to create an environment that is sufficiently safe for members to go forward with the change to which they are called.

The fact that “change produces stress and that stress reveals pathology” means that others who share in the change one is experiencing are also demonstrating their personal pathology. Recognizing and understanding this goes a long way in smooth living and working toward the new reality. The attitude of a forgiving heart – a heart that is willing to forgive others’ less-than-helpful responses to stress as well as one’s own – is a grace to pray for and live out in times of change.

