

Silence, Simplicity, and Slowing Down

BY BILL DILL

“As our culture gets louder and moves faster,
it seems often to move less thoughtfully, as well.
Our culture seems to continually diminish our space and
time to think . . . And if there is little time to think,
there is even less time to deeply reflect.”



“**T**HE HARVEST IS ABUNDANT but the laborers are few”
(Mt 9:37). As youth ministers, there is so much to do. Youth
group is on Wednesday, parent meeting on Thursday, parish
festival this weekend, the website needs an update, the copier is
jammed, the admin needs help with Canva, volunteer formation
night next week, and the liability forms for the retreat need to go
out. Collections are low, someone burned out and quit, and we
don't have the finances to hire this year, so the staff will need to
work together to cover their responsibilities. Might this sound
familiar?

We need Saints!

But what is our primary call? To know and love the Lord. What is the best thing we can do for our youth and our parish? Know and love the Lord. And yes, serve the Lord, but note: that does come third.

We need saints in our parishes and on our parish staff. We need authentic witnesses much more than we need great speakers, organizers, or teachers. Yes, these skills are important, but a holy disciple will usually be more effective than a skilled disciple—and far more effective than a burned-out disciple or a purely bureaucratic disciple. But effective at what?



What is our purpose at the parish? To balance the budget? To get a teacher for every class? To get the schedule completed? Those tasks are necessary. They need to be done. However, they are a means to an end. Our real purpose is to be authentic witnesses as holy, healthy, joyful disciples of Christ and to invite others to “come and see” as Jesus did.

But do we feel like disciples of Christ, or do we feel more like ecclesiastical bureaucrats? Do we really believe that by working more hours or more industriously or more efficiently that we’ll really get “everything done”? How much did Jesus cram into his work week? Did he meet all his deadlines?

When I was a teenager, I made a clear decision to give my life to help other teens experience the love of Jesus. Our teens today, just like then, are starving to experience his love. We have such a gift to give them! The temptation for me is thinking that if I work harder or longer I can help more teens encounter Christ. But what a tragedy to “save the world” and lose my own soul—or not care well for the souls of my wife or children. St. Thomas

Aquinas wrote that we do not have an equal responsibility to everyone on the planet. Rather, we have a greater responsibility to those in our immediate family and friend group.¹ For instance,

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no one else can be a husband to my wife or a father to my children. This is my primary vocation, but it is tempting to spend the best of myself at work caring for other people's children.

Our world is full of time-saving devices. We are always pushed—by ourselves or others—to accomplish “more.” While it is obviously true that “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers few” (Mt 9:37), we are not called to accomplish all the work of all the missing laborers. Christ calls each of us to follow him—to live as he lives, to love as he loves. This takes time. It takes time to love. It takes presence. My wife and I often quote a friend who once said, “parenting is not efficient.” Many of us know from experience that getting multiple children to Sunday morning Mass on time with all their clothes on—in a kind, loving manner—is not efficient. The same can be said of our work. Good ministry is not time efficient.

Is Busy Better?

As our culture gets louder and moves faster, it seems often to move less thoughtfully, as well. Our culture seems to continually diminish our space and time to think. We can't even use a public bathroom without facing advertisements vying for our attention. And if there is little time to think, there is even less time to deeply reflect. With so few moments to reflect, how often do we really pray?

We are frequently frustrated by how busy our parish families are. They have sporting tournaments, school plays, and a myriad of other activities—so there just isn't time to come to faith

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 26.

formation or retreats. We can't make them slow down or change their priorities. We can, however, make changes in our *own* life to model a slower pace, a healthy work-life balance, and prudent priorities. I often find myself joking about the importance of saying "no," but it's really no joke at all. We must say "no" frequently so that we can give a full "yes" to the Lord and what he is calling us to do. Christ calls us to serve and has put a desire to give of ourselves deep into our being. Perhaps, then, we should avail ourselves of a more positive approach to "no": "Yes, I can do X, Y, or Z, but I can't do that and my current work. What would you like me to drop?"

Let's consider a few things our youth formation leaders have actually been asked to do:

- Manage the website, social media pages, and the bulletin
- Pick up slack in the elementary and adult ministries
- Coordinate parish events, such as volunteer appreciations, staff birthdays, and teacher appreciation
- Help teach classes in the school
- Help in the school kitchen when they are short staffed
- Use their personal Sam's Club membership for church purchases
- Start Little Flowers and Blue Knights clubs
- Pick up furniture bought off of Facebook Marketplace for the church offices
- Solve tech issues, since they are typically the youngest people on staff, even though most parishes pay an outside company for tech support
- Substitute in the school or for the parish nurse
- Run a family ministry event, including scheduling planning meetings with volunteers, coordinating signups, and being on-site for the event
- Serve donuts on Donut Sundays
- Take the pastor's dogs out for a walk and potty break

Ecclesiastes teaches that there is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1). We have the wonderful gift of the liturgical seasons to make extra time to focus on certain parts of our life in Christ. We need to do the same each day and each week. Let's be sure to take time with Christ and his Word each morning. Let's be sure to take time to pray with our fellow disciples each day and each week. Let us work productively in a healthy environment for a healthy amount of time. Let us be peaceful and fully present to the Lord and our youth and families when it is time for ministry. No one would suggest that John Paul II or Mother Teresa didn't get much done. However, they both took a significant amount of time for prayer and were both very present to the person who was right in front of them.

In this noisy world, silence can be hard to find. But we must find it. Think of the "still, small voice" of God in Scripture.² How are we to hear this voice in our heart if our life is full of noise and our mind consumed with busyness? Yes, there is time for music and laughter and revelry, but we must pursue times of silence, as well.

I often fall prey to the sin of greed—I want to do more, accomplish more, reach more, meet more. St. Francis of Assisi gets credit for saying, "Do few things and do them well." I need to remind myself of this often, and I suspect that many others may need to as well. There are good reasons to lean toward doing few things well over doing more things poorly. First of all, we have very few reports of Jesus, our model, doing things poorly. Second, we are called to love. Those we are serving are usually better served and thus, better loved, when we do things well—especially when doing things well includes doing things in a timely manner. Often, doing more causes me to be more harried, which quickly leads me to be less careful and less kind. I am greatly saddened when I realize I have not treated people—especially my family, my co-workers, or my volunteers—well, that I have not truly been present to them or taken the time to listen to them. "Much done" but not "much loved" is a net fail.

2 See, for example, 1 Kgs 19:12, Ex 3:2, Dt 4:11, Jb 4:16, Ez 1:4.

Whether it is a fault in our personality, our boss, our job description, or the structure of our church administration, I'm convinced we would all do well to simplify and slow down. Haste really can make waste: If I accomplish much but fail to love, I've wasted my day. If I do it enough, I've wasted my life.

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So what do I do?

Let me suggest a few practical steps:

1. Have a conversation with your supervisor and/or pastor to make sure you know what they really want you to accomplish. Sometimes we think they expect more or want different results than they actually do.
2. Weigh your job description against what you actually do. We all tend to add our own touches to our work that we think are very important and thus, sometimes, are responsible for our own busyness.
3. Weigh your goals against your work. Is this program or this task actually accomplishing your mission?
4. Prioritize. If you can't do it all (reminder: you can't), then do the tasks that are most in line with your mission.
5. With appropriate permission, cut the unnecessary.
6. Be a good, responsible, diligent servant. We are called to work hard. We have a sacred mission—arguably, the most important mission on earth.

Nothing I've said here should be misconstrued to suggest that our workday should be "easy." The ideals of working hard, being effective, being peaceful, and working reasonable hours are not incompatible. In fact, done right, they are mutually supportive.

Simplifying, slowing down, and finding silence is really hard to do in our culture. Hard, but not impossible. This only means that we must be very intentional. Fr. Jacques Philippe has some wisdom for us if we find it challenging to slow down:

If I am still not able to remain at peace when faced with difficult situations, then it is better that I should begin to strive to keep this peace in the easier situations of everyday life: to quietly and without irritability do my daily chores, to commit myself to doing each thing well in the present moment without preoccupying myself with what follows, to speak peacefully and with gentleness to those around me, to avoid excessive hurry in my gestures and in the way I climb the stairs! The first steps on the ladder of sanctity could very well be those of my own apartment! ³

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³ Fr. Jacques Philippe, *Searching for and Maintaining Peace: A Small Treatise on Peace of Heart*, trans. George Driscoll and Jannic Driscoll (Staten Island, NY: Society of St. Paul, 2002), 82.