

## [Opinion](#)



President Donald Trump talks with members of the press on the South Lawn of the White House July 17, prior to boarding Marine One to begin his trip to North Carolina. (Flickr/White House/Shealah Craighead)



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As sometimes happens when you're a columnist with a set schedule and routine, I went into this week with a sense of what my topic would be. I had nearly two thirds of a column draft written when I got close to my usual deadline and froze.

What I was writing about felt reasonably important, but it suddenly seemed like a non sequitur in the wake of a tumultuous week of news, each topic of which beckoned to be addressed: Donald Trump's exceptionally [racist remarks](#); NCR's own [investigative series](#) on the growth, influence, and political advocacy of EWTN's media empire; the [Catholic Day of Action](#) in protest of child detainment at our southern border; and the internecine conflicts surrounding the recently published *instrumentum laboris* for this October's [Synod of Bishops on the Amazon](#) â?? to name just a few.

This led to a conversation on Saturday with a friend who commiserated with me about the overwhelming state of global and ecclesial affairs. Like so many people, I felt inundated by the gravity and seriousness of the events occurring on a daily (sometimes hourly) basis and therefore entirely unsure about how to use my twice-monthly column. It can be hard enough to keep one's attention on the deluge of infuriating and upsetting news, let alone choose just one theme to write about with any kind of depth.

It was in discussing this reality, this seemingly "new normal" of our time, that my friend wisely suggested I write about exactly that experience of the incapacitating onslaught of today's news and the mental, emotional and spiritual toll it takes on so many of us.

The challenge before us is real: How do we determine when to look, read, think, pray and protest, and when do we step back for the sake of our health and general well-being? How do we take care of ourselves mentally, emotionally and spiritually in a context of great social turmoil and collective anxiety while also making sure not to abandon our civil and religious convictions and responsibilities?

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A recurring theme in Pope Francis' homilies, encyclical letters and apostolic exhortations has been the danger of indifference and the call Christians have not to turn away from the real suffering, injustice and evil in the world around us. In his 2013 exhortation [\*Evangelii gaudium\*](#), Francis highlights the danger of globalization and unregulated capitalism. He writes:

To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.

In his 2015 encyclical "[\*Laudato Si'\*](#): on Care for Our Common Home," the pope repeatedly warns against the apathy seen on the global scale in response to those people most affected by climate change and to the planet itself. The result, he notes, is the widespread sin of omission: "Many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is."

Yet it was in his 2018 exhortation, [\*Gaudete et exsultate\*](#), on Christian holiness that Francis cut right to the heart of the obligation we have to open ourselves to the tragic realities of those who suffer and are oppressed. In a short reflection on Matthew's account of the beatitude "Blessed are those who mourn," the pope contrasts the persistent temptation we face to ignore the problems around us, to "avert our gaze" and to "disregard painful situations, cover them up or hide them," with what Christ calls us to do.

Francis notes that this beatitude is about becoming more compassionate. Mourning in this case is about opening oneself up to the suffering of others:

A person who sees things as they truly are and sympathizes with pain and sorrow is capable of touching life's depths and finding authentic

happiness. He or she is consoled, not by the world but by Jesus. Such persons are unafraid to share in the suffering of others; they do not flee from painful situations. They discover the meaning of life by coming to the aid of those who suffer, understanding their anguish and bringing relief. They sense that the other is flesh of our flesh, and are not afraid to draw near, even to touch their wounds. They feel compassion for others in such a way that all distance vanishes.

This is all well and good, and certainly a message in keeping with Gospel. And it is certainly needed more than ever when our community bonds are fraying even as our communications technology grows. But there are those who are already taking this call seriously and do not close themselves off from the realities of others. What about those who find themselves striving to live what the pope is reminding them to do? Where do we draw the line between self-care and selfishness?

Last month, Kaya Oakes wrote an article in America magazine about the [challenges of burnout](#) for lay people who work for the church. Without the resources of a religious community or a diocese to potentially support them, as often happens with consecrated religious or ordained ministers, lay professionals are typically left in the lurch. One of the instructive observations in the article that applies to lay and ordained professionals alike is that for those who are actively involved in the life of the church and its ministries, an otherwise common source for solace and rejuvenation for the weary may actually become a cause for exhaustion, suffering and cynicism.

It's hard enough to open oneself up to the suffering of others when the cause of the suffering is situated in civil contexts or social institutions. But what about when the cause is also division, injustice or scandal in the church? One doesn't have to be employed by a religious institution to experience the burnout Oakes describes; just being a Catholic who takes her faith seriously in trying times can be enough to push one over the edge.

I don't have an answer or a solution to the problem of at once striving to be compassionate while also building a sense of resilience devoid of cynicism or indifference. I'm not sure there is one simple answer or a singular solution. But I do believe that this is something we as the church need to address. And it would be wise to consult experts in psychology along the way.

Just as the church must create a space and provide resources for the healing of victim-survivors and their families in the wake of clergy abuse, so, too, it must work to empower all Christians to take up their baptismal responsibility to "do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8). But doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly can be exhausting and overwhelming, particularly when we are inundated with so much. The church needs to be better at helping us be better Christians so that we can respond to the challenges of our time compassionately without burning out or becoming apathetic.

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