

Rightsizing the church: physical accountability

Tom Gallagher | May. 11, 2009



(Pat Marrin)

Mission Management

From the fictional Friar Tuck and the saintly Thomas Aquinas to the Blessed but rotund John XXIII, the Catholic imagination recalls many wise and compassionate, if conspicuously overweight, models of wisdom, prudence and compassion. But such corpulence, however endearing in retrospect, can have a decidedly negative impact on the church and its ministries.

Size, it seems, does matter.

In late February, for example, the Siena College Research Institute -- the survey and polling arm of the Albany, N.Y.-based Franciscan school -- released a report that found 44 percent of Empire State residents acknowledge that they are overweight. Less than one-third believe they are in good health and at the correct weight.

The Siena survey found that more than 90 percent of New Yorkers agree that obesity is a serious public health problem and three-quarters (76 percent) have all the information they need in order to eat a nutritious diet. Nearly two-thirds, meanwhile, have had a doctor talk to them about diet, exercise or nutrition.

“When it comes to health, nutrition and exercise, knowing and doing just don’t match up,” said institute director Dr. Don Levy.

When it comes to Christian clergy, the picture is decidedly worse. A 2004 national survey of more than 2,500 religious leaders by Pulpit and Pew, a research project on pastoral leadership based at Duke Divinity School, found that 76 percent of Christian clergy were either overweight or obese, compared with 61 percent of the general population.

The costs are real: Overweight or obese persons can raise group health insurance rates, are more likely to miss work for health reasons, and, when it comes to clergy and other church managers, say some, set a bad example for the work force.

"Influential people ought to live the example that resonates with this survey data, namely, people should take care of themselves," says Levy.

Siena College practices what it preaches. The school supports a health and wellness program for all of its employees called the "Employee Fitness Challenge," cosponsored by its Human Resources and Health Services departments.

The multiweek program puts participants on a "Round Trip Passport to Health" that relates good nutrition tips and exercise to a geographical region. An employee in the program, for example, might describe the value of tomatoes, which were first cultivated in South America. Employees are then encouraged to play soccer and to learn about Brazil.

The free program is open to all college employees, who are encouraged to create teams and to compete for prizes.

The key to any program is support from the top of the organization, says Levy. "Employees need to be encouraged to take time to exercise, even during the workday and sometimes an organization needs to dedicate resources to develop and implement such programs," he said.

And the church is no exception.

"It is a problem and it needs to be addressed by the bishops in each diocese," Fr. David Toups, a priest of the diocese of St. Petersburg, Fla., told Catholic News Service last year. Toups is associate director for the Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"As the bishops look at accountability of priests, that physical accountability has to be there, for their own well-being and the well-being of the people they tend to," he said. "It's about making sure their physical and spiritual needs are being met and about them being credible witnesses for God."

There is plenty of church teaching to back Toups' view.

Vincentian Fr. Richard Benson, professor of moral theology at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, Calif., cites Pope John Paul II's "Theology of the Body" to make the case for fitness. "Moral stewardship of the body is not only a negative one (don't smoke, don't mutilate the body, don't use contraceptives, don't abuse alcohol, don't use drugs, don't abuse steroids, don't engage in risky behavior like drinking and driving, etc.)," he writes. "It also entails a positive mandate, that we are morally responsible to do what is in our power to maintain good health."

Meanwhile, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, "Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God. We must take reasonable care of them, taking into account the needs of others and the common good."

Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to NCR. Ideas for a "Mission Management" story? Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.

Online resources

To read the Siena College Research Institute Report, "Special New York State Health Poll," visit www.siena.edu/sri/research and click on "Archives."

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