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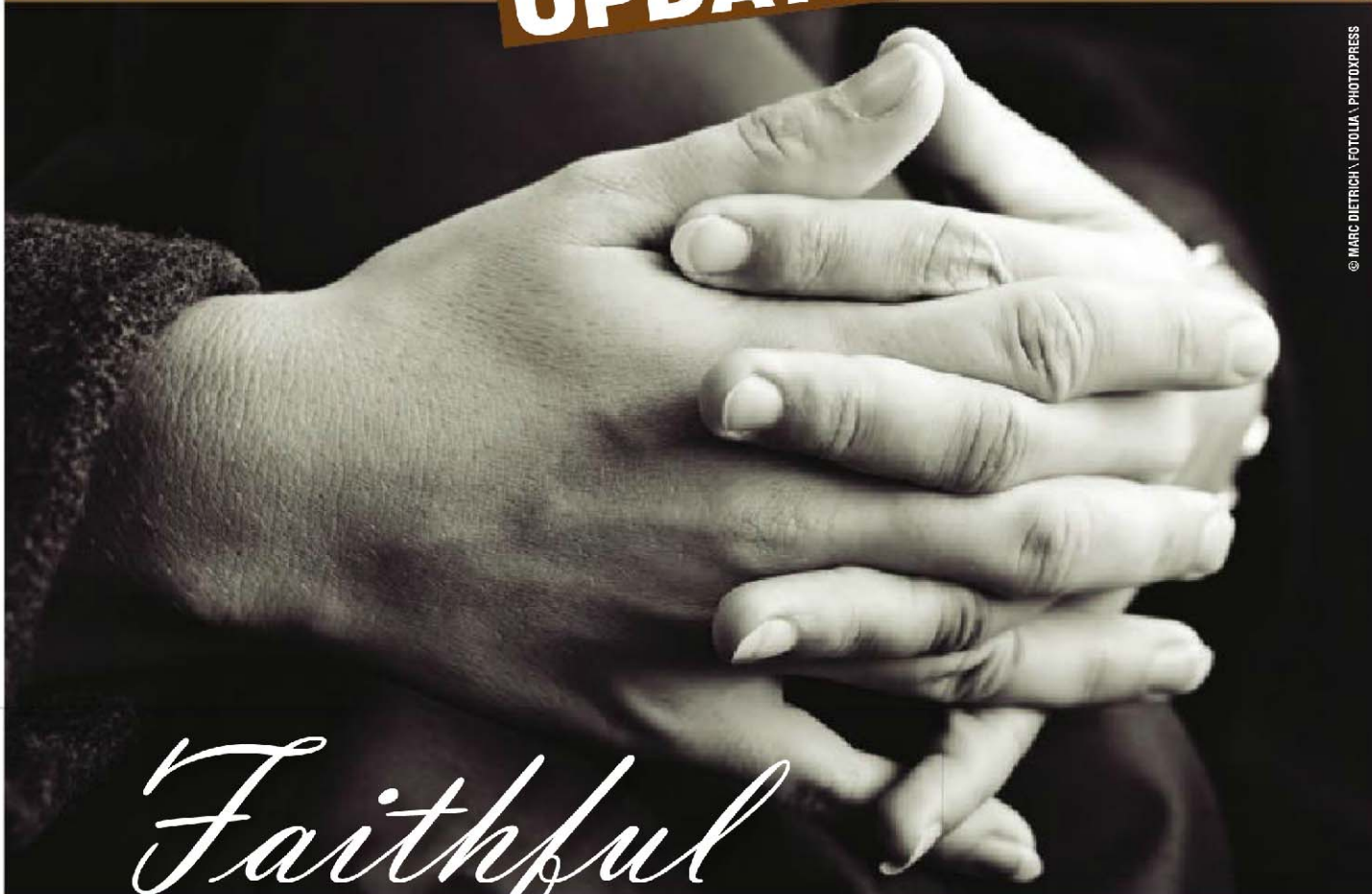
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Faithful

SIMPLICITY

by Susan K. Rowland



We know that living complicated, too-busy lives in a consumer-driven culture has not been good for us—as individuals, as families, or as a society. The popularity of the topic of simplicity is evidence of this. Magazines offer articles with titles like “Seven Ways to Simplify Your Life,” self-help books on simplicity abound, and speakers and life coaches offer guidance for living more simply. If our culture didn’t have a problem with simplicity, there would be no market for this topic. No one is writing books titled “How to Complicate Your Life in Three Intricate Steps.”

We Christians are called to live more simple lives as an expression of our faith. Jesus set an example of simple, worry-free living. We're taught that it's a matter of justice not to use more than our fair share of the world's resources. Many saints are examples of living simply as a way to grow spiritually.

better our careers, activities we're asked to do, things we want to buy—including the latest gadgets or books that promise to simplify our lives!

Yet the call to simplicity, to faithfully live the Gospel, is still there. It's all throughout the Scriptures. It's in the teachings of Jesus, the example of our saints, and the exhortations of the

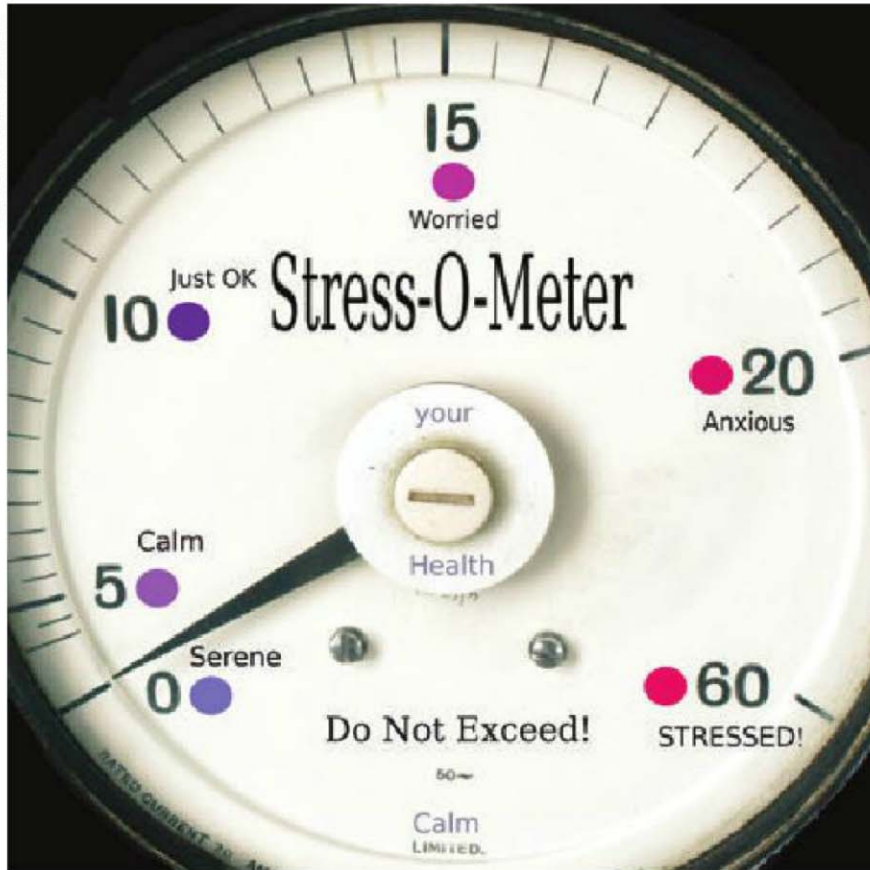
would love to relax more, get organized, and slow our frantic pace. We long to spend more quality time with our loved ones, with God, and with ourselves. One teaching of the Church with which we can totally agree in our heart of hearts is the principle of faithful simplicity.

Jesus on Simplicity

Probably the most forceful teaching of Jesus about simplicity is found in the Gospel of Matthew: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat [or drink], or about your body, what you will wear. . . . Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself" (6:25-34). In 10 verses, Jesus covers the whole gamut of the un-simple life: from concerns about food, drink, and clothes to the worry that complicates all our lives.

But how are we to carry out these exhortations not to worry? The answer to that comes later in Matthew's Gospel, in one of the most beloved Scripture passages in the Bible: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me . . . and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (11:28-30).

Jesus' life was anything but simple. Sure, he lived in a non-technological, farming society with fewer distractions than we have today. But it wasn't a simple society, nor was Jesus' place in it free of troubles or demands. Requests for his services were unending. His disciples had their own agendas about who he was and what he should do. The religious leaders first opposed him, then plotted his death.



Too Busy to Simplify?

A challenge to living simply in our 21st-century culture is this: It isn't easy to change our lifestyles or our habits. So many of us are overcommitted, overworked, and stressed out. It seems it would take much effort, time, and energy to change or even to think about what to change. And most of us have little extra time or energy these days.

The thought of cutting back on commitments or clearing out our clutter may be overwhelming. It appears easier to continue doing what we do and hope things will change someday. Worse yet, we're surrounded by temptations to complicate our lives further: ways to

Church. This consistent message may seem an indictment of our consumer lifestyle and an attempt to make us feel guilty, yet our hearts really long for a simpler, more basic lifestyle.

We're tired of the rush, busyness, and consumerism of our culture. We were never meant to live this way. We

“Let us live the simplicity of a great love, which is both the simplest and hardest thing on earth, because it demands no more and no less than the gift of oneself.”

—Pope Benedict XVI

How did Jesus stay free of worry and faithfully simple? He went off to pray first thing every morning. Jesus understood, Son of God though he is, that we human beings need time to get away from others, to pray, regroup, and receive strength and courage for the day ahead.

Read Mark 1:21-39 for an account of a typical day in Jesus' life. He begins by teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, driving out an unclean spirit, curing Simon's mother-in-law of a fever, and then resting for what remained of the Sabbath. As soon as the sun goes down, the crowds arrive, bringing him "all who were ill or possessed by demons." After such a busy day and only a few hours of sleep, Jesus gets up before dawn to go off to a quiet place to pray.

Jesus' prayers are interrupted by Simon and others who "pursued him and on finding him said, 'Everyone is looking for you.'" Does this sound familiar? Does it sound like a day in your life? At times, we may feel as if everyone needs something from us. Jesus made sure to take time out from the demands of his life for quiet time with God. That's how he kept his life simple and his spirit at peace, even as he knew he was moving toward certain death on a cross.

Inner and Outer Simplicity

We cannot have outer simplicity in our homes and schedules without inner simplicity. And, if we are at peace inside, if we lean on and learn to trust God for our needs, our outer lives will reflect that.

We can begin to seek this balance from the outside in or from the inside out. If we clean up our outer clutter, we will become less scattered and chaotic inside. The reverse is also true. If we set aside time for God first thing in the morning as Jesus did, we'll find more energy for simplifying our environments. We'll also make better choices about how we spend our time, money, and energy.

Five Tips for Simplifying

1. START by keeping a simple, 15-minute, morning-prayer appointment with God. Begin by saying a simple prayer. The Lord's Prayer, said slowly as you think about each line, is a good way to start. Then move on to write in your journal or pray for your needs or the needs of others. End simply by trying to keep still and quieting the chatter in your head.

This may be difficult to do at first, but, as with any skill, you will improve with practice. Rest in God's presence and absorb God's love and light. Then start your day—and see what a difference doing this makes over time.

2. DO the exercises in the boxed material of this article. What discoveries did you make about yourself, the things that energize you, and those



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- Having less clutter around the house? Less to do?
- Buying less?
- Working fewer hours?
- Cooking more and eating out less?
- Getting your finances under control?
- Letting go of some of the housework or gardening?
- Having fewer conflicts with loved ones?
- Feeling less tired at the end of the day?
- Going out less and enjoying relaxation at home more?
- Seeing friends and family you have been too busy to fit in?
- Never again bringing work home from the office?
- Saying *no* to things you don't care to do?
- Saying *no* to the latest purchase or demand on your time?
- Saying *yes* to those creative activities you long to do?
- Getting less mail, email, or ads that tempt you and clog your mind?
- Having fewer projects hanging over your head?

AFTER READING THIS ARTICLE and the questions above, you should have a pretty good idea of what faithful simplicity means to you. Make a list of specific ways you'd like to simplify your life. Begin to implement them, one at a time.

things that sap your energy? What is your personal definition of “faithful simplicity”? Make one goal based on these exercises and begin to implement it today.

- 3. ASK** a friend to help you clear your clutter—to help you clean out a closet or garage. Then reciprocate by doing the same at your friend’s home. It’s easier and faster to work with someone else. Another person’s objectivity helps us see our possessions in a new light and enables us to part with items we neither need nor want.
- 4. START** a stream-of-consciousness journal. You don’t have to be a great writer or good at expressing yourself. No one but you will see this writing. Simply write about your problems, relationships that trouble you, the state of your home, or your thoughts about your boss.

You may decide to shred or burn these words later, but writing about your emotional issues gets a lot of anger and confusion out of your head and onto a harmless piece of paper. Writing about your worries is a great life-simplifier. This exercise can help

you clarify problems, or it may simply allow you to vent and let go of anger.

- 5. GET RID** of old projects. We all have old projects or hobbies we were enthusiastic about years ago that we haven’t continued or completed. Now we may feel guilty about the cost involved, so we keep the materials, thinking we’ll get back to the project someday. Give these things away to a thrift store or toss them out. Then that project can never bug you again. You can even check it off of your to-do list!

The expression of faithful simplicity is different for each person. We all have clutter in our homes and worries on our minds that need to be cleared. Faithful simplicity means making more room for relationships, for relaxation, and for better spiritual, mental, and physical health.

How and what to simplify in our lives is an individual choice. But any attempt at faithful simplicity must begin by imitating Jesus’ example and spending some time each day in prayer and quiet with our God. ■

Susan K. Rowland is a freelance writer from Arizona and the author of Make Room for God: Clearing Out the Clutter (2007) and Healing After Divorce: Hope for Catholics (2010), both published by Franciscan Media. See her website at susankrowland.com.

UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) How can living more simply be a reflection of your faith?**
- 2) What temptation or demand makes it difficult for you to live more simply?**
- 3) When will you make more time for daily prayer and quiet in the next week?**



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What Takes Up Your Energy?

ONE REASON WE NEVER GET around to simplifying is that we don't have much energy left at the end of the day. Find out what saps your energy and what energizes you.

Keep a detailed time chart for two days—one weekday and one weekend day. How do you spend your time? Include personal hygiene, meal preparation, and time spent with family and friends, paying bills, watching television, reading, etc. Now put a red check next to those things that sap your energy and a green star next to those things that rev you up, that you enjoy doing.

What does your life look like? Do you have more red checks or green stars? What could you do to add more green to your life and minimize the red?