

THE LIKABLE CHAPLAIN

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Test your imagination. A senior officer is asked to comment on the chaplain who serves his unit. Here's what the officer says of the chaplain: "I didn't like him when he came and I don't like him now—but he's one splendid chaplain!" Does that sound plausible? Or, to test your imagination further, let's suppose that a lower grade enlisted man also comments on the chaplain. He says of him: "I can't say that I like him, really, but he's a fantastic chaplain!" Again, does that sound plausible? With rare exceptions, that is never said. I propose that the prevailing attitude is this: a chaplain who is not liked is a chaplain who is not effective. What concerns me more than any such generalization is what you, a chaplain, believe about this matter. Do you believe you *must* be a likable chaplain?

There's more than an outside chance that scores of troopers feel that their chaplains are the "good guys," the sincere, concerned men who "really" understand. In short, we may get the notion that—in contrast to the line officers—we are the likable fellows.

Then, on the other hand, the fact that we can comfortably associate with officers and receive their compliments ("Best chaplain I ever met!"), might lead us down the broad path of believing that we're just as likable to both officers and enlisted men. And maybe we are—really!

So where's the catch? What's wrong with this? Is someone trying to tell us that there's something wrong with being liked or wanting to be liked? Not at all. Wanting to be liked is no sin. Several years ago, Barbara Streisand recorded a hit song which said that people who need people are the luckiest people in the world. Right on! Moreover, I venture to say that we can agree that an important part of needing people is wanting to be liked by people. By this definition, the luckiest people in the world come in all shapes and sizes and vocations.

There is one vocation, however, whose members seem to have a special need to be liked. That's the clergy. Ever since psychology became a vital ingredient of seminary entrance exams and curricula, we have been told that we may well have chosen this pro-

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fession because of our need to be liked. Many of us may envision ourselves as kindly men of God in the traditions of Elisha, Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi, and Bing Crosby playing "Good Father Flannigan." These are powerful images. And so are those of the pastors of congregations of our childhood—men who, in our eyes anyway, were beloved by all. Unfortunately, when any of us fails for whatever reason to portray or live up to these traditional images, there's usually someone nearby who suggests that we may have "missed our calling." Worse yet, a departure from the image may cause us to question our own calling and suffer great pains of guilt and doubt.

I remember the uneasy feeling I had the day I discovered that St. Paul and I failed to see eye to eye on some matter. My thoughts ran something like this: "Well, I can live with this difference, but what will others think? Are there people who will consider me an outcast, a heretic?"

One danger we face is that of transforming our NEED to be liked into our MISSION. And that's simply a matter of judging our effectiveness and success mostly in terms of compliments from the command people, or counting the numbers of persons who come to hear us preach, or seek our listening ears in counseling, or favor us with "goodies" of various sorts. But whatever missions are given to us by our ordinations, endorsing agencies, and commanders, they simply MUST be greater than this. The mission is always more than being liked.

How easy it is for us to be blind to the strength of the need to be liked. I recently experienced something which painfully alerted me to the strength of my own need to be liked. My commander, the Alcohol and Drug Control Officer, was desperate to find an officer to run the Drug Rehabilitation Center. In his desperation, he asked me, the drug chaplain, to be the officer-in-charge for a month or so until a replacement arrived. Fine. *Seven months later*, the replacement came. This misplaced chaplain had become the middle man between the ADCO and a DRC staff of approximately 15 people—civilians, officers, NCO's and enlisted counselors. Through the process of implementing the ADCO's directives in the DRC, I learned at a "gut level" how real and strong was my need to be a "likable" chaplain.

There I was—the "boss" to those fifteen people. There is no way any boss can always be liked by everybody. And no matter how valuable he considers the group process to be, there are times when he has to say, "This is not a matter of group process" or "I hear and understand you when you say that you don't like this, but this is the way it has to be" or "I must relieve you."

When I had to say such things to certain people in the DRC, I

felt pangs inside myself. The stronger the pang, the colder and more matter-of-fact I'd be—or try to be. At times I would try to give the message “gently” and “understandingly” which often meant that I was being “slippery” or “weasel-worded.” Sometimes, as I experienced discomfort, I'd try to be humorous—tell a dumb anecdote, perhaps. But all was a coverup for the naked fact that I had to say or do something for which someone would not like me. The feeling was real and sometimes painful.

We all know the impossibility of being all things to all people—that we can't always be liked by everybody. All of us know that the price paid for trying to be liked by everyone makes the spender a pitiful person. Even so, we see it happen, and might well weep at what we see.

What, then, can we do? I've already suggested that acknowledging and *accepting our need to be liked* is a healthy first step. My assignment at the DRC was a tremendous help to me in taking this first step. Then, if you're willing to go further, you might *re-examine some of those religious heroes* who set standards and images for us. From what I can see, only when those men of God are romanticized are they altogether likable. Most had the dubious distinction of being despised—some were stoned, some killed. Those like Jesus and Isaiah—who demonstrated a need to be accepted and loved—had to live with their needs and yet carry out their greater mission which frustrated their need to be liked.

There is a third step. *Consider the commander.* He has an awesome responsibility to make decisions which unavoidably invite dislike from other people. He lives in the tension between wanting to be accepted and carrying out the mission. We can take a cue from some of these outstanding commanders, and by observing, discover how they manage to achieve a balance.

I would close, then, with a “call to arms” for us chaplains. No, it is not, “All right chaplains, let's get out there and be *disliked!*” Let it rather be, “Let's be careful that being liked is not too important for us, lest in wanting to be liked, we come to despise ourselves and compromise our mission.”