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Editorial: Testimonies of Confreres on Self-Care (Part 1)

At the beginning of 2026, the Self-Care Team is delighted to present the first in a two-part series of testimonies focusing on the lived experiences of our confreres with regard to self-care. These testimonies are not intended to be overly idealised; rather, they should be viewed as humble accounts from confreres who have agreed to share how they navigate the 'ups and downs' of missionary life while trying to look after their health and their vocation.

This first selection brings together voices from a wide range of missionary contexts, from those at the start of their missionary journey to those reflecting on a lifetime of dedicated service. In reading these accounts, a clear common thread emerges, namely that self-care is multidimensional in the sense that it encompasses the body, the mind and the spirit.

The narratives in this edition highlight several key themes arising from our confreres' accounts:

- Physical discipline and resilience: There is a shared recognition that caring for the body through balanced nutrition and regular exercise is a pre-requisite for a fruitful mission.
- Mental and emotional health: The testimonies openly highlight the importance of mental health, which is often not discussed enough. This includes the need for times of introspection and the ability to distance oneself from harmful relationships that hinder personal growth.

- Self-acceptance: The necessity of accepting one's own limits is emphasised, whether these are physical inaptitudes or unexpected events in pastoral life that disrupt our plans.

By sharing the personal experiences of these four confreres, the Self-Care Team hopes to help bridge the gap between theory and practice with regard to self-care. The team also hopes that sharing successes and satisfactions, as well as the challenges encountered by some confreres in the area of self-care, might be useful and enriching for other confreres.

We are reminded in these reflections that we only have one life and that it is our responsibility to live it well by taking care of ourselves.

Bernard Ugeux, Yago Abeledo and Olivier Soma
Self-Care Team



Eighty-year-old Brother James Heintz from the USA shares how participating in a residential programme greatly improved his general health and encouraged him to adopt new self-care practices.

Taking care of myself

“Let us work, work, my sons, said our Founder; we’ll have all eternity to rest up.” I don’t regret having worked hard in my life: fixing, building, maintaining, painting, wiring, plumbing, teaching, catechizing, visiting, supervising for buildings and facilities from Malawi, to Ghana, to the USA. As a young missionary I was even director of our summer camp program offered to young families and staffed by White Father scholastics. Ours is an active society. Such a life-style is not without its dangers. No wonder we are starting to hear the term “self-care.”

As my eightieth birthday neared, I made a sort of late-course correction to bring more physical, psychological, intellectual (!) and spiritual balance for this new stage. I’ve always been aware of the need for what is currently called Self-care. (Even Lavigerie, a work addict, slipped away to rest in his native province when over-tired or ill.)

A few years ago, I experienced a four-month program at the St John Vianney Center near Philadelphia. I was stationed in Washington, DC at the time. This program proved to be an excellent preparation for my next assignment to our retirement community in St Petersburg, Florida. I am by no means idle here. I assist with transportation for confreres who no longer drive, tackle various maintenance projects as requested by the community, and keep reasonably busy. Since my stay at the St John Vianney Center (S.J.V.C.), however, I think I am probably better at caring for the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual elements in me. I think I am healthier for it and that there is more joy in my life as a result.

“Reset, tune up, jump start,” call it what you will, the time at S.J.V.C, did make a difference. Freed from my usual routine, I decided to take full advantage of that period to practice habits that touch all aspects of my life. Bodily well-being was a good place to start. I was dealing with some of the health issues of older age, recovering from shoulder surgery, getting physical therapy etc. At the center I took regular walks on the paved paths of a beautiful park, gradually stepping up the pace and improving my balance. Physical therapy and better nutrition and eating habits produced an almost effortless improvement in my weight, dropping 70 pounds over that period. In fact, my Washington community, instructed by phone, rummaged through old clothes to dig out slimmer trousers for my shrinking waist. (“Yeah, but did you keep it off?” You ask. So far so good after almost three years! Thanks to choosing more nutritious food, skipping between meal snacks and sweets and soft drinks.) The session was an opportunity to get in touch with and sometimes face feelings, attitudes, and values in my life. Intellectual life probably deepened as a result though I am not planning to redo the Summa of St Thomas Aquinas anytime soon. Prayer, always part of my life, continued to grow there. Living together in a different setting was very valuable for the communal and relational dimension.

Now I am in my new community. If you visit our neighborhood, a suburban enclave in St Petersburg, Florida, you’ll see me enjoying my daily walk. On hot evenings (every day from May to October) I walk after dark but you can still spot me. Just watch for what looks like a swarm of fireflies. That’s me pushing my walker with its little warning lights up and down our streets and lanes. Good for physical self-care. But, here’s the thing: It’s a time for emotional, relational, and spiritual life too!! Everybody knows me, a familiar daily passerby. Southerners are friendly. It does my heart good. People are out too sometimes laughing and talking, often dog-walking. People greet me, toddlers and children waive,

puppies strain on the leash for me to pet them. When it's quiet, there is time for thinking, saying the rosary or just enjoying God's beautiful nature.

We often neglect the physical but it is the low hanging fruit of self-care. Maybe dieting couldn't work. I found that good nutrition, good eating habits, and consistency could. Choosing nutritious, balanced foods in sensible portions, avoiding sweets and eating between meals is useful. At my age, a daily walk makes for sense and sanity.

Family has been important to me. I have been able to live that dimension more closely now that I am settled in the same country. That has meant living shared losses including the death of an older sister this year. I was fortunate enough to spend quality days with her during her final illness. Telephone, email, and occasional visits enable me to be in touch with my remaining sister, like me a child of Lavigerie. Some nieces and nephews keep regular contact. Many friends do the same. I've had a lifetime link with several families from the old Camp Lavigerie days whose grown children organized periodic reunions to which I was often invited.

We all know the perils of overuse of mass media and social media. While this problem is undeniable, I also think television and videos can enrich the mind. The stars and planets, God's handiwork, are understood more. In the same way, animals have always fascinated me. I delight in videos and tv footage of big cats, domestic pets, dinosaurs and the birds and sea creatures.

Our vocation has encouraged us to grow spiritually every step of the way. Mass and the sacraments are a part of my life. Old age and the power of example can challenge us in healthy ways. I am blessed with a good spiritual director. Again, I try to make modern media a servant, not a master. I sample a range of texts and videos ranging from Rohr to Rolheiser to Barron. Every day brings readings, commentaries and talks inviting us to live our faith.

Time and experience have helped me to get to know myself better. I try every day to use that knowledge to become a better person and to draw closer to God.

Br. James Heintz, M. Afr



Fons Vanden Boer is from Belgium. Aged 88, he is living in his home country. He tells us how he has always made a conscious effort to practise self-care as a way of life.

My experience of self-care as a way of life

After my ordination in 1963, I spent the first nine years in Uganda, in the diocese of Mbarara; roughly speaking I had three appointments: three years teaching in the minor seminary of Kitabi, three years of pastoral work in the parish of Bubangizi and three years being managing editor of the diocesan biweekly newspaper Ageetee. He following nine years I was located in Kampala where I started with others 'Interservice', a set-up to overcome the disastrous consequences of the economic situation under President Amin. Initially the organization bought and imported what was needed for the continuation and survival and life of the Church institutions south of the Nile. I was also involved in the foundation of the Joint Store (joint meaning Catholic and Church of Uganda). Both undertakings still exist. The rest of the country was aided and served by the Comboni Father's.

In 1984 I left Uganda and after a long leave I was disappointed to South Africa, after three years of pastoral work In the diocese of Bethlehem I moved to the archdiocese of Johannesburg for educational work in the Black schools and in my free time I did pastoral work and founded a parish in Soweto, where I lived alone during 4 to 5 years.

In 1997 I was called to be the provincial bursar of Belgium and then of the Province, in all eighteen years. Then I returned to South Africa for three years to be assistant priest at the cathedral parish in Bethlehem. At the age of eighty I returned to Belgium and now I am part of a community of 10 elderly confreres residing in a home in Antwerp. As long as the Lord lived I had the opportunity of spending 33 years in Africa.

Self-care, for me, has always been a conscious effort or way of life. Many of the attitudes contributing to self-care come from the education received at home. Order, work and commitment were values upheld in my family.

Self-care, in a way, comes from the Latin saying '*mens sana in corpore sano*'. The expression stresses the importance of bodily and mental health. Of course when growing up 'spiritual health' will have to be added. I have never been an athlete or a sport man but I always kept, so to say, active. Throughout primary and secondary school, I cycled a lot. As a teenager I helped my father a lot during the holidays in his building works. Several times I took part in building camps in

Germany organized through the Building Order of Fr. W. Verstraaten. During my years in Africa I kept busy with gardening, flowers and maintenance work, I also supervised several building jobs. There is a Dutch saying "laziness is the pillow of the devil". It is good to remember what St Ambrose said about work: "Christ worked to the end, since he took upon himself our labours, as he says: 'Come to me, all of you who labour, and I will refresh you.'"

Besides bodily activity there is another relevant fact in bodily care: eating and drinking, never too much of either! Regulatory and variety is part of healthy eating. Most of our bursars are good providers. What is provided should never lead to overeating and drinking too much. I have always been keeping an eye on my Body Mass Index (BMI).

The next point of self-care is mental health. Most of us have many years of schooling and learning. There is so much to remember and likewise to forget. However, I have always kept on reading, serious books and worthwhile novels. To me it is important to keep in touch, with Church life and Church matters, with history and social life including political life. I still remember the scrapbook I made of the first hundred days of President Amin in Uganda: articles from local and international publications.

Also part of mental self-care is listening to news broadcasts or watching them on television. I like to know what is happening in our world, in our immediate surroundings and in our Society – sometimes I think that our website could do better. This helps to share in conversations with confreres and other people. Keeping in touch with what is happening in the country where we live is a necessity. As a foreigner we are to show interest in the life of our host country.

The last point of self-care is spiritual life. Our spiritual attitudes start at home, learning prayers and reciting them, going to church with the family. At school and in local parish I received catechism lessons. We had to learn by heart a number of questions and answers. The Catechism of the Archdiocese of Malines was well known throughout Belgium. In secondary school I had to follow dry and abstract religion classes. Several of my classmates became anticlerical and antireligious.

Once in the formation houses of the M.Afr, real spiritual formation started. The best year was undoubtedly the novitiate. Both the conferences of the novice master and the course of the New Testament were often eye openers. My novitiate was the first group that did the long Ignatian retreat. It was almost too much to undergo and to digest. The later years things became clearer and more

meaningful. Two points struck me during the retreat in the novitiate: 'agere contra' – never to let go, to react and persevere. Another point was obedience: rules and regulations are needed to have an orderly personal and community life. I never accepted what some say 'plans are made to be changed' and the same they say about rules and regulations.

Order in life, I believe, comes from Christ: 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. As a missionary priest I must attempt to follow Christ and to imitate Him. Staying on the right path, living well and serving to the full according to Gospel. It is lifelong effort to get to know Him and to get to know Him better. I read the Gospel, pray and meditate, a regular retreat is helpful. It is not easy to imitate what Christ said about himself: "Learn from me that I am meek and humble of heart".

The two Gospel verses that I mentioned are an inspiration and guidelines for me; but it remains a continual battle to live up to them. My prayer life is centered on Christ: I admire and appreciate Him and try to follow Him. I try to cultivate faith and trust by often repeating the prayer of Compline: 'Keep us safe, Lord, while we are awake; protect us while we sleep, so that we may keep watch with Christ and rest with him in peace.' 'Pray for us now and at the hour of our death' is part of my Marian devotion.

I cannot say whether my self-care efforts help me in my life as a Missionary of Africa because I lead only one life: to live and witness as a Missionary of Africa.

Fr. Fons Vanden Boer, M. Afr



In this article, Albéric Minani, a 53-year-old Burundian confrere currently serving in Mali, shares his thoughts on self-care. He discusses the challenges encountered in this area and the strategies adopted to overcome them.

Satisfactions and challenges in self-care

Talking about self-care means committing to exploring certain aspects of one's inner self that manifest themselves through one's relationship with oneself and others. It is an attempt to express oneself while keeping in mind that one receives from others. Taking care of oneself means taking care of the most

precious gift, life, with a view to making it more fruitful. It is therefore a way of preparing oneself to better serve humanity and/or the Church, and thus better respond to one's vocation. Indeed, self-care that is not oriented towards service is a selfish pursuit of oneself.

Practices adopted

As I have already mentioned, any initiative to take care of oneself aims to improve the quality of life in the service of others. To achieve this, a certain discipline is required, which must be imposed on oneself and followed as much as possible. Personally, I have adopted practices related to diet, physical exercise, relationships and prayer.

a) Controlling my diet

'Those who watch what they eat reduce their medical bills,' they say. For my part, I would say that 'those who pay attention to what they eat and drink protect their health.' Eleven years ago, I discovered that my blood sugar, uric acid concentration and bad cholesterol levels had reached alarming proportions. Since then, I have been careful about what I eat and drink (tea without sugar, less fruit, less alcohol, no red meat, less fatty foods, etc.). As a result, my annual medical check-up shows that everything is almost back to normal. On the other hand, I drink a lot of water, especially in the morning.

b) Exercising regularly

To stay in shape and prevent certain diseases, it is advisable to engage in regular physical activity. For my part, I have been walking and doing other suitable exercises for some time now. Unfortunately, I started late (because I was not introduced to it at a young age), which led to arthritis and now I have an artificial knee. Of course, nothing is automatic, because regular exercise alone does not necessarily guarantee good health. However, I have to admit that every time I exercise, I feel my body and mind becoming more refreshed. I will talk more about this later when discussing satisfaction. Today, no matter what my schedule is, I always find a few minutes to do some physical exercise.

c) Taking care of one's relationships

By 'relationships,' I mean my relationship with myself and with others. The quality of my relationships can reveal and influence my physical, mental, and

psycho-emotional health, either positively or negatively. In concrete terms, certain events and trials, if not handled properly, can generate negative energies within me, which in turn are likely to cause intrapsychic conflicts. They can condition my behaviour and attitudes. However, they can also become an opportunity if I strive to accept them as an integral part of life.

It is also important not to remain in a relationship that does not allow you to flourish. These include 'predatory' relationships, which some people enter into for their own interests: money, sex or other favours in terms of honour, promotion, etc. For example, some groups of friends break up because what united them has ceased to exist. We leave them after discovering that the focus of interest was not serious. Over the years, I have come to embrace the words of an author who said: "There is a time to be kind and a time to say, 'Stop, that's enough'. Sometimes you have to know how to distance yourself from bad influences in order to build your life... "

In addition, taking care of oneself means being careful about what one says about political situations, especially in countries at war. Here we understand that self-care is only possible when we exercise discernment.

d) A life of profound prayer

Prayer is another practice that allows us to take care of ourselves. It helps us to face certain trials in life and to get through them in a healthy way.

Satisfaction

If I had to briefly evaluate the practices mentioned above, I would say that I have been satisfied with them, thanks to the discipline I have tried to impose on myself, especially with regard to diet.

By paying attention to what is going on inside me, I have come to agree with this author, whose identity I do not know, who says: "Life has made me realise that when you learn to go through trials, suffering and difficulties without letting them control you, destroy you or turn you into something you don't want to become, without allowing them to completely drain you of your energy, good humour, hope and positivity, you develop great power, resilience, strength of character and maturity. You then acquire a rare ability to build the inspiring and fulfilling life you have always deserved."

I have also found that prayer helps me find inner peace and become more aware of my identity, that is, the reason for my presence here. In short, it allows me to make more thoughtful decisions.

Challenges encountered in terms of practices

The first challenge relates to diet or beverages. On the one hand, it is not always easy to find suitable foods (depending on one's diet) or to resist external pressure (particularly from friends, in the case of alcohol). Furthermore, we are not always able to control everything that happens to us; we do not choose what happens to us, when or how. It is therefore not always easy to control ourselves in the face of certain humiliations and degrading injustices. Sometimes, our emotions or our instinct for self-preservation are stronger than we are. So how can we maintain a balance between fighting for our dignity and preserving harmony in our relationships, for example? Should we keep our negative energy to ourselves in the name of peace? This is not always easy, or even possible. Always saying what you think, even to free yourself, is not always well received, because 'the truth, if you say it too soon, will cost you dearly'. Finally, physical disability (the inability to jog or do other exercises because of my knee prosthesis) is another handicap that makes it difficult to implement self-care practices. In other words, it is not easy to accept one's disability and integrate it into one's life as part of oneself. Thoughts invade the mind without one wanting them to, and fighting them can be a lost battle!

Strategies put in place to overcome challenges

- Not holding grudges or negative energy is a path to liberation.
- Having the courage and freedom to leave a group of "friends" when I realise that they are not contributing anything positive to my life.
- Giving prayer a central place in my life.
- Being faithful to the decisions I have made, regardless of external pressures, especially when it comes to alcohol or dangerous friendships.

Over time, we manage, not without difficulty, to transform our thoughts about our disability (which initially lead us to reject what has happened to us) into an opportunity to understand the value and meaning of life. Ultimately, we come to

the conviction that, even if we do not choose what happens to us, we can nevertheless choose to learn many lessons from it.

In short, taking care of oneself means taking care of life. As Mother Teresa said, "Life is a chance... Life is beauty... Life is a challenge... Life is a duty... Life is precious... Life is a treasure... Life is a struggle... Life is happiness... Life is life..." In turn, our vocation is to "seize it, admire it, face it, fulfil it, care for it, preserve it, accept it, deserve it and defend it."

Fr. Albéric Minani, M. Afr



In his testimony, Modeste Tebuka, a 36-year-old confrere from the Democratic Republic of Congo, currently serving in Morocco, shares his experience of taking care of himself as a young confrere.

My experience of self-care

I have been living in Rabat for two years now. I started by learning Arabic. As you can imagine, learning a new language is never easy. You have to be patient, humble and willing to be corrected. In the process, you get to know yourself better: your strengths and weaknesses, your motivation and your inner tensions. This raises several questions: how will my mission unfold if I don't manage to master this language? However, by doing exercises, homework and making a personal effort, you realise how much progress you are making and how capable you are of learning.

At a certain point, I realised that learning Arabic was starting to bore me. I took a few steps to get out of this rut. I started doing sports and seeing friends. I bought an exercise mat and do exercises in my room for an hour every day. I divided this time into four sessions: when I wake up, after lunch, around 4 p.m. and in the evening before my shower. This individual physical activity motivated me to go even further by creating a football team for migrants. This benefits others and also contributes to my personal fulfilment. Sometimes I visit friends. Other times, I walk through the alleys of Rabat. All of this helps me regain my breath and continue my Arabic studies normally.

I would like to add a few self-care practices that I am aware of. The first is meditation. It gives me a sense of inner calm. The second is related to eating habits. I make sure not to eat snacks between meals. I also avoid keeping food or drinks in my room. The third element concerns interpersonal relationships. I do not hesitate to distance myself from certain unhealthy relationships.

Everything I do to take care of myself gives me satisfaction, because I like to have a balanced and organised life.

However, in my efforts to take care of myself, I also encounter challenges. The main challenge for me is related to a lack of consistency and regularity. This is often due to the fact that I sometimes have to change my usual schedule to respond to pastoral emergencies. I also realise the need to know how to say no to certain requests. I know that this is not easy, especially when someone asks for my help. However, I need to know how to discern and decide what I should do.

In conclusion, I would say that taking care of oneself involves knowing how to listen to one's heart and body.

Fr. Modeste Tebuka, M. Afr



Questions from the Self-Care Team to expand on personal reflection and community sharing

1. In the various testimonies, confreres highlight personal organisation, discipline, consistency and regularity as essential qualities for self-care. How do I measure up to these qualities in my experience of self-care?
2. When intense or traumatic experiences are not properly addressed, they are likely to have a negative impact on mental health or manifest themselves in inappropriate behaviour. In concrete terms, what am I doing to take care of my mental health? Am I aware that, sometimes, professional help could be useful for taking care of my mental health?