

Renewal of Vows “*Reflecting on Ministry*” Tuesday in Holy Week 3-30-10

Forty years ago this past December Bishop Rath of Newark laid hands on me at St. George’s Church in Maplewood, NJ, where I subsequently served as curate and then rector for 23 years.

I remember distinctly praying in relative disbelief as I knelt there: “**Well, Lord, I guess now I am a priest.**”

However, for me it took a long time to grow into that awareness. It came as a **shock**, kind of like becoming a husband, then a father, even a grandfather. Big changes in life take me awhile to grow into. What a journey...

Bishop Rath had been so helpful in the process. I was so uncertain whether to go to seminary or not. “Well,” he said, “I didn’t know either; so I decided to just go and try it out, to see if *I was fit for the ministry* and *if the ministry was fit for me.*”

Good advice! I went to General and the first summer I did New England Parish Training working at St. Bartholomew’s, White Plains (where coincidentally, Ed Mott, Pam’s Dad was the senior warden), **I LOVED IT!**

It was like being thrown into the pool and having to swim. It was great!

- I loved the hospital calling;
- I loved the outreach in the community;
- I loved being with the people “at points of their deepest need,” as somebody profoundly said at the time and I picked it up as my own mantra.

I learned the second summer in CPE how “deeply needy” **I** was, so no wonder it felt like a good match!

I was intimidated by the preaching but got on with it, gradually finding my voice and hitting my stride. I remember the curate at the time coaching me for my first sermon, and from the darkened back row of the church, bellowing out, “**YOU’RE PUTTING ME TO SLEEP!**” Good grief, that was traumatic. I never forgot it and still tremble to think somebody might yet be saying that!!

Much of those early impressions and experiences are still mine today. Sometimes I come out of a hospital or nursing home call and as I walk to the car, I say to myself, almost as a prayer: “Lord, **this** is why I am a priest.” It’s like participating in a very intimate moment. You pray with someone and they weep. They are so grateful to be cared for and to experience the priest as a conduit to God. I was happily amazed one time when I found out that one of the meanings of the word for priest is “bridge.”

Now I know that good lay callers do the same thing. In fact, one time when I was in the hospital as a patient, on the OTHER side of the bed rail for a change, **it was the lay callers** whom I didn’t even know personally who were like angels to me in my need. One time in the middle of the night when I was frightened about back surgery coming up the next day, one lay nurse whom I knew slightly from the neighboring parish came to my room at the end of her shift. She rubbed my back quietly reassuring me. I’ll never forget her. She was like an angel in the darkness, and a veritable prayer in action.

So, ministry occurs in so many ways, lay and ordained, but still I am moved by the privilege of being a priest and having people trust in you in ways that seem somehow godly and holy.

The day the bishop asked me to make this reflection I was honored

- and the muse came to me instantly
- and I started to jot down thoughts in my journal and have returned to them a few times.

I realize I am **so filled with appreciation for being a priest** and involved in ministry these 40 plus years **that I really WANTED to share** and acknowledge just what this demanding calling both requires from us but gives us at the same time.

I was away for five days last week in Florida, but it was impossible really to be away. Three people died whose families I connected to and whose funerals had to be partially planned in absentia.

Coming home last Wednesday was the pits. I hated it and wanted to stay away. Re-entry is ALWAYS hard for me---change again!---but I got back in stride pretty quickly and before I knew it I was caught up in all the grace that flows through all the tough stuff we each encounter every day.

In the mail was a card written by one of the old ladies who had died, expressing her love and appreciation for a visit and a plant my wife had bought for her before we left because it reminded her of spring. We both wept, felt the grief and the love, and was reminded once more of Queen Elizabeth's oft quoted remark that "grief is the price we pay for love."

Much in the ministry provokes grief of all kinds for all kinds of reasons. I often have thought as much as my kids would make great priests, none of them felt the call for ordination although they seem to me to lead very priestly lives in their own callings. One time one of them said they remembered too many evenings of my going out and one too many vacations being detained or even cancelled because of parishioners dying or in trouble. I used to hate answering the phone on the day of departing on holiday for fear of what call there might be to derail us. And on the last day of our July vacation 35 summers ago my daughter, Stephanie, was born. I left my wife and new baby in the hospital and trucked 2 kids, the dog and the mother's helper back to NJ because the rector for whom I worked was going on vacation August 1st and I had to be there. **Now**, I think that's crazy, and horribly ego driven, but **then** I just thought that was my duty and part of the sacrifice of the calling. So I keep up therapy, now called spiritual direction, to help me remember who God is and who I am, and not get so confused. Such direction helps also to cope with the grief over the tragedies, and every day dissonances, we all face in this life, but to which the priest seems to have frequent access.

The mystery of being "**in Christ, and Christ in us,**" however, is a continuing challenge as well as a joy.

- I love being involved in the discernment process for potential new priests.
- I love to witness the formation going on and the excitement about serving and preaching and celebrating that is so mysterious to folks like us.

There is so much to learn and it never stops, exhausting on the one hand and so energizing on the other. Underneath it all there seems for me to be a **mysterious union** into which we are called day by day to experience:

in prayer and action, sacraments, silence and service that makes me pray just like 40 years ago: "I just don't get it, Lord. Grant me your grace to be your priest, trusting in your providence, and your Love for this life and the next." Amen.

