

PRIESTS AS MOTHERS OF THE FAMILY

On Friday I got together with some priest friends of mine. But these men are more than friends. Back in my seminary days in the early 1970's a group of us seminarians decided that we would come together each week and pray together and share our faith journey and our struggles and joys. There were six of us in the beginning. Over the years we added some new members, some have dropped out, some left the priesthood, some have been transferred outside the diocese, and some have been called home to God. But there is still this core of five priests and we now meet once a month and three times a year we take a Day of Recollection together at the seashore. We discuss, we laugh, we share, we raise our concerns, we kibitz, we needle each other, we pray together and then we go out to break bread together. It was more than six hours together. It was wonderful.

We all know we are accepted and loved. We are among the walking wounded now, like the old priests we would look at as young Turks and think, "We'll never be like those guys." No—We ARE those guys. Health is now a major issue. One had a kidney transplant. Another has multiple sclerosis, a third has cancer of the pancreas but is in his third year of remission, another has had struggles with emotional stress. He is my confessor and Spiritual Director. He knows my soul. We have shared much over the years and we know we know each other—and are known.

We share vignettes. We tell funny stories. We reminisce about the past. We speak of the goodness of you the people we serve and how impressed we are with so many of the things we see you do that you don't know we see. Coming from a family of accountants I did some number crunching. We have met well over 600 times, over 100 Days of recollection, with many retreats together. I thought of all this because of one said yesterday that the readings for this Sunday were the readings for the Sunday of our First Mass 45 years ago.

I looked at the readings and saw the weakness of Judas and how another had to take his place. I saw how Jesus bid his apostles and friends to love one another. I was reminded that we do and continue to. What most Catholics don't realize is that you study for all those years in the seminary with these men and you form the very tightest and most intimate of bonds with them. But on the day of your First Mass they are not with you. They are celebrating their own First Mass. And the likelihood is that as close as you are you will probably never be assigned to minister with any of them or live with any of them.

But we have all come to know that the love which binds us together as one comes from God and that love abides. It lives in us—albeit in an imperfect manner. What's more we abide in it, in that love that is Jesus Christ. His prayer at the end of the Last Supper was that we should all be one as he and the father are one. Jesus even says today to His Father: "Keep them in your love that they may be one. I pray for them that your joy may be in me and my joy may be in them." While today's readings were the very same ones all those years ago, I did not preach that day.

You always ask another priest, usually the priest who is your sponsor to preach for you. Msgr. William H. Flatley was my sponsor and homilist. He gave me a copy of his homily and I dug it out and read it for today. It still sounds pretty on target about what the priest does and who the priest is although the world has gotten less connected to the living God as some would say.

A few of his thoughts:

Through his ordination the priest becomes “another Christ.” He stands as a mediator between an all-loving God and sinful men. He doesn’t preach his own doctrine but preaches “Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

My dear people, this is the Catholic priesthood—to preach God’s word, to dispense God’s mercy, to bring God down upon our altars, to take God into the marketplace, in brief to unite man with God in the great work of salvation.

He must be a man of prayer. He must never forget his life is to be a life of service. He must remember that it was not he who chose Christ but Christ who chose him.

All right on target. Aside from his homily he pulled me aside and gave me two pieces of pretty sound advice. He said, “Stephen, as a priest always take your responsibilities seriously but not yourself. Never lose your sense of humor.” I actually have tried to live what he preached and the counsel he gave. I have been supported and bolstered by my priest friends over all the trials and tempests of the last half century.

Back in the nineteenth century in France Pere Lacordaire was one of the best known spiritual writers of his day. He had a way with words. These words I put on my holy card commemorating my ordination, May 19, 1973:

To live in the midst of the world, without desiring its pleasures.
To be a member of each family, but belonging to none.
To share all sufferings.
To penetrate all secrets.
To heal all wounds.
To go from men to God to offer Him their prayers.
To return from God to men and bring pardon and peace.
To have a heart of fire for charity.
To have a heart of bronze for chastity.
To teach and to pardon, to console and bless always.
My God, what a life!
And it is yours O priest of Jesus Christ!

Yes it is. Yes it is.