

Along The Way

With Bishop Matthew H. Clark



These weeks of the Crossroads to Life journey have been rich in grace and peace. It has been my joy to be with you during this Lenten season as together we have tried to place all that we are into the renewing hands of God.

Your generosity in prayer and service has filled me with new hope and your startling simplicity before God and one another has allowed me to experience anew the Christ gift of peaceful freedom which needs to be given even greater reign within us and among us.

Allow me please the privilege of introducing to you some of the people I have met along the way. I shall not use real names of all but I shall tell you about real people and why they impressed me. Then I shall invite you by means of a question or suggestion to allow them to bring their goodness to you — or to remind you of others who have been a like part of your own journey.

The Widow: Mary spoke with directness and simplicity about widowhood and the ways it changed her life. Those at table with her at the family life meeting listened with special attention because her total presence in her words disallowed any other response.

There was no complaining, no recrimination. There was simply the statement that her life, once so full and happy, was now touched by a double loneliness. Not only had she lost her husband but somehow in connection with that she had also lost the care of many friends.

That care had been there in abundance immediately following the death of her spouse but fairly soon the number of calls from her network of friends began to diminish. Her times with them remained pleasant and cordial enough, especially when their activities and conversations were not totally couple oriented. But she began to notice that while her initiatives were warmly received, it was always she who got the ball rolling. Invitations from others became fewer in number. It became progressively more difficult for her to take the first step and she gradually stopped doing it.

To be at table with her at that moment was to share her pain but it was also to be inspired by the gift of trust she offered to each of us. She was beautiful in her simplicity and vulnerability before us and her strength-giving gift elicited a caring response from those to whom she spoke.

All problems gone at that moment? Probably not. But there were seeds planted which I believe will bear good fruit in the lives of those at the table — thanks to Mary who was human enough and simple enough to say she was lonely. Thanks also to the good people who were not frightened by Mary's gift but who gave themselves back in their effort to understand and be with her.

In the season of reconciliation and renewal it's good to remember people like Mary because she helps us to be sensitive to the loneliness which can be so much a part of human living and the journey of faith.

And so I ask myself and ask you to make the questions your own:

Who are the lonely people in my life?

Have I communicated to them intentionally or unintentionally that they are outside of my care or the care of the community?

Am I lonely in any way? Can I speak of this to anyone? And do I permit others to speak of their loneliness with me?

How does Jesus regard the lonely?

The Pastor: Sam and I took a long walk. Bishop and pastor spoke with one another as friend speaks to friend — about challenges and joys, about consolation and failure, about ways of mutual support in the service of God's holy people.

It was ordinary conversation — just two people talking about the everyday events and experiences. But I came to know Sam a lot better and I hope he came to know me more personally.

I remember Sam today because he told me that he felt boxed in sometimes — pigeon-holed by others according to his skills and abilities, rather than appreciated for the person he is.

It pains him because it bedims in the eyes of such people the strong desire and ability he has to care for and serve God's people. It also dampens his desire to share with them all that that service means to him.

Insist that he be more aggressive in manifesting the depth of his person? I suppose that would be one way to respond. How much more life-giving, however, when we make it our business so to regard others as to invite them to be and become even more themselves in our company.

They benefit of course because such regard recognizes them as persons who like ourselves want always to grow in experience and spirit but cannot do that in isolation and without care.

We benefit because when we are part of the unfolding mystery of another person we are very close to the mystery of God's love for His people.

I need very much to leave people free — and to be left free myself from unchanging categories and judgments. For who can always be wise or funny or knowing or attentive or virtuous? Who does not need to be forgiven and allowed room to change and become?

The Couples: I want to mention two married couples I met.

Marie and Peter are the first couple. They are on in years now and not in the very best of health. In fact, health needs and available care now require them to reside in two different health care facilities.

I had the pleasure of meeting them only for a few moments while visiting the Livingston County Infirmary but they were important moments for me.

Why? — Because in those moments in which I shared their company, their love for one another shone forth with a clarity that was very touching. Their conversation bore no statements about themselves but was filled with questions about the welfare of the other. It was clear that though the separation is difficult it has not lessened their love for one another.

Two friends in Owego bring another manifestation of love back to me at this moment. Elizabeth has some difficulty breathing and therefore is limited in her physical activity. Her spirit however is vivacious and she is filled with humor.

Clint, her husband, does the cooking and cares for those household tasks which Elizabeth loves doing but can no longer manage.

His attention and her humor, his quiet joy and her singing spirit showed me again the serving side of love and reminded me that in this wonderful Body of which we are a part there are many signs of the Lord's loving spirit. If only we had eyes to perceive the wonders of His love coming to light in people all around us!

The two couples call me to remember the deeper commitments of my baptismal life — to love and to serve in the name and spirit of Christ.

In their gentle ways they raise questions which may cause me difficulties but which I need to hear:

Why am I doing what I do? To give flesh to the committed Christ-love to which I am called?

Or simply because it pleases me? Or gives me good feelings? Is there direction and purpose in my life? Or am I simply drifting?

Do I stick with my convictions when they seem no longer to bring a great deal of joy? Or when the romance is over? Or the passion spent?

Who are the people and what are the ideas and activities in my life which lead me to a spirit-joy which lasts?

The Kids: They're wonderful you know! — with a greatness given them at the hands of the loving God who molded and shaped them and called them to new life in Christ.

There is Scott, a young boy I met at an evening prayer service in Phelps. I asked Scott to pray for me in a special way during Lent and he said that he would. It was a promise I made also to him so we have been palling around in our prayer for several weeks. I am grateful to Scott because I firmly believe, although I may not say it enough, that Jesus reveals himself to our very young and gives them his profound spiritual gifts at an early age. For this reason I treasure their prayers and am not at all shy about asking for them.

And how about Sister Cathy O'Connell and the 12 students from the State University of New York at Geneseo who gave up half of their two-week Spring break to repair and restore the homes of people who cannot do it for themselves? I met them in Owego while they were helping John and Mary. There was something about those kids — alive, loving and with purpose — which is contagious and most encouraging. I remain grateful to them for the way they are responding to the Lord's kindness to them.

Yes, I worry about some of them too. Recently I saw Barry at a basketball game. He had clearly consumed far too much alcohol, was disruptive and generally behaving like the south end of a donkey heading north. I wanted to shake him because that kind of mindless behavior doesn't even come

near to describing who he is as a person, or who he can become. I've seen him since and found him his usual delightful self. Another time I may ask him about the game.

There are times when we need to be corrected, I guess. But whatever our age, good example and encouragement seem to me to be far more productive of the good than scolding.

And especially with the young — I don't ever think we can thank people enough for their goodness and the fine things they do.

I wonder if I am patient enough with the young? Or allow them enough room to find their own way?

And am I willing to struggle and pray for the grace to do it with compassion when I need to say the correcting word to someone in my care?

Do I know the difference between encouragement and pressure?

How did Jesus treat the young; and what does He say to me and model for me with respect to authority?

Do I live in such a way as to bring out the very best that God's love has planted in our kids?

The Sisters: Yesterday and today, March 19 and 20, have been like a retreat for me.

We celebrated the Feast of Joseph at the Motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph on Saturday; today I had the privilege of presiding at the Eucharistic Liturgy and at the election of the new superior general.

It was a retreat because to be there was to be invited into the spirit of joyful prayer in which the Sisters approached both events.

The preparations, thoroughly and prudently carried out, were over. Now had come the time to surrender all to the Lord's guiding spirit. The peace and tranquility of the days indicated to me that the Sisters had done that.

Sister Elizabeth Anne LeValley is the new superior general of the community. Sister is an intelligent, caring woman who brings rich experience and the respect of the community to her new task. In your name I promised to her and the new leadership team the prayer and support of all of us in the Diocese of Rochester.

The solemnity of the moment of the election reminds me of how blessed we are in the religious women of our diocese.

By their life of prayer, their apostolic commitment, and their care for one another they remind all of us of who we are and what we are meant to become.

It dawns on me that I have written of our Sisters who serve in Brazil and Chile and Selma but that I have never written in a similar vein about the Sisters who serve day in and day out in our 12 counties. Let me do that now, at least in a beginning way, by saying that I love and respect them very much and am deeply grateful to all of them for the rich contribution they make to the life of the Church.

They teach our young, nurse our sick, comfort our bereaved, serve with our poor, write our poetry and sing our songs. The works of justice and peace are in their hearts and we are all touched somehow by the outpouring of their love for God's people: the abandoned, the lonely, the prisoner, the bishop, the priest, the child.

I wonder if we're all sufficiently aware of and understanding of religious life these days.

Much has occurred in religious life since Vatican Council II and I suspect that we may not always have explained those changes clearly enough.

If there is an understanding gap, we have the ability to work on it. Maybe you could help with that by asking a friend in religious life to tell you his or her exciting story.

And so, dear friends, these are some of the people I have met along the way. I could have chosen five or ten or twenty others to write about because I remember at least that many more.

In this season of renewal and reconciliation they have all been gifts to me because they have brought me closer to the Christ whose love they reveal.

Their goodness has called me from my sin; their hospitality has pierced my loneliness; their commitment and service have sparked a renewal of my own.

In my prayers I thank God for them all.

And I thank God for you.