

Columnists

## Of aging and the gift of letters

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

Recently, when I was preparing to move from Holy Trinity, Webster, after 15 happy years there, to St. Alphonsus, Auburn, a double header was converging. One was my departure; the other was my arriving at the age of 80 years. So the parish put on a gala party celebrating both the farewell and the birthday.

Because of the pending departure, Father Thomas Mull, who has been the liturgical honcho of the diocese, phoned. He has charge of assigning priests for the television Sunday Mass broadcast at 11 a.m. over Rochester station WHEC. He said: "You will be leaving the area soon, and I'd like you to do a TV Mass before you leave." "I'd be glad to," I replied. "It's a great privilege." After such a broadcast of the Mass, a few kind people write a note of appreciation. One of the nicest came from a lady in Ottawa, Canada. It read:

"I tune in to the TV Mass every Sunday morning from Rochester. I feel privileged to assist at Mass every Sunday. Today, however, I was particularly inspired by your homily, and your down-to-earth style of celebrating."

Strangers visiting our parish often express their appreciation of my celebration of Mass, and I am humbly grateful to God and to them. But it isn't different from most priests' Masses, excepting that the homily is always homely, instructive and sometimes has a bit of humor. And after Communion time, the people recite with me a few traditional aspirations, for example "O Sacrament Most Holy," "O Mary Conceived Without Sin," and the prayer to our Guardian Angel. This thrills the older people, and I hope the younger ones will preserve these precious prayers.

"Being a shut-in at present, I have a little trouble with a knee cartilage that just went on strike. I blame it on old age, as I just celebrated my 86th birthday. However, I am in reasonably good health, so I can't complain." Her 86 years and my own 80 brought to light an article I cut out from "Dear Abby" years ago.

## On the Right Side

Advantages of Being 80

"We oldsters sure do get away with a lot just because we've managed to keep breathing longer than most folks. I have just celebrated by 80th birthday, and I've got it made.

"If you forget someone's name or an appointment or what you said yesterday, just explain that you are 80 and you will be forgiven. If you spill soup on your tie, or forget to shave half your face, or take another man's hat by mistake, just say: 'I'm 80, you know,' and nobody will say a thing.

"Being 80 is better than being 70. At 70 people are mad at you for everything, but if you make it to 80, you can talk back, argue, disagree and insist on having your own way because everyone thinks you are getting a little soft in the head. They say life begins at 40. Not true. If you ask me, life begins at 80."

The Ottawa lady concluded: "The children's letters wishing you *bon voyage* struck a special chord. I was a primary teacher, and I know how precious these letters can be.

The children at Holy Trinity sent farewell letters that were priceless. At the homily I mentioned this, saying: "A fourth grader asked his teacher how to spell Alcatraz. Wondering, she asked: 'Why do you want that?' 'Well, that's where Father Cuddy is going.'" Auburn has a prison, and to TV-educated children, a prison means Alcatraz.

The lady struck an important chord — that a letter or a telephone call means a great deal to most people, especially to those less able to be about. And a letter to the editor is usually the most-read article in most newspapers, including the *Courier-Journal*.

## A different kind of apparition

By Father Richard McBrien

It was a raw and misty night. The December meeting of Immaculate Conception's Social Ministry Committee had ended, but two of its members lingered for several minutes to set a time to meet later in the week to follow up on a community-action project.

Once they'd agreed on a time, Phyllis and John began gathering their papers and coats. A sudden gust of wind whipped the light rain against the basement window. "Be careful driving," John advised.

"You, too," Phyllis replied, as she headed toward the other side of the room to turn off the lights. When she was halfway across the room, something caught her eye. "What's that?" she asked, stopping in her tracks.

"What's what?" John asked.

"There!" she said, pointing to the picture of the Blessed Mother on the rear wall. "Something moved!"

"What do you mean?" John asked, smiling.

"Did the Blessed Mother wave to you or something?"

"John, I'm not joking," she said, still staring at the picture of the Virgin. "That picture smiled at me. I swear it!"

John was perplexed. He didn't believe anything had happened, but he was uneasy about Phyllis as she stood there, shaking.

He tried to break the tension by joking. "Cut it out, Phyllis. Every Catholic school kid knows that when pictures and statues of Mary do funny things, it's always tears that flow.

"We all know that when Mary appears, she's always as mad as hell. She'd never smile at you or anyone else. Not in a million years," he teased.

But Phyllis wouldn't be placated. She had seen what she had seen, and she would not be talked out of it.

By the time they were in the parking lot, Phyllis looked and acted like someone who had just escaped a serious accident by inches. The experience had left her shaking and confused.

"Would you like me to drive you home?" John asked.

"No," she replied somewhat vacantly. "I'll be all right!"

Suddenly they were enveloped in the strangest of light, and the figure of a woman

## Essays in Theology

emerged from its edges. She was pleasant and smiling, and held up her hands in reassurance.

"Don't be alarmed," the woman said. Her voice was as calming and as peaceful as any they had ever heard. "I've come to confirm you in your faith, not to frighten you.

"You, Phyllis and John, are a joy to my Son. You serve the weak and the powerless. You challenge the rich and the mighty. You give hope to those who have had no hope."

"What is it you want of us?" Phyllis asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Nothing more than this: that you should persist in what you are doing no matter what the obstacles and no matter what the opposition, especially from those who claim to be disciples of my Son.

"Tell your friends that Jesus did not die and rise to strike fears in your hearts.

"Tell them that our Creator is loving and just and compassionate and merciful. Blessed indeed are those in whom God's love and justice and compassion and mercy dwell.

"Tell your friends that discipleship has to do with the way we treat one another, not with what we do in church. And tell them, too, that if they really want to be loyal to the one they call Holy Father, let them also put into practice what he has said and written so well about justice and human rights and peace."

The woman vanished as quickly as she had appeared, and so, too, did the light.

Phyllis and John were to recall the expression on her face far more vividly than her words. She had been smiling all the while, as if she were the happiest person who ever lived.

Could that really have been the Blessed Mother? Smiling, not weeping? Encouraging, not threatening? Promoting justice, not devotions?

The Blessed Mother? Seriously?



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