

Process spurs honesty, reflection

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

One of the rewarding experiences of my spring calendar is the opportunity it affords to visit with the priests of our diocese. We do that at our Convocation held each year in the week after Easter week. Other opportunities come with confirmation visits.

My favorite time for catching up with our priests is in personal conversation with them about their lives and ministry. This kind of conversation can happen at almost any time, since we are quite free to contact each other whenever we want to do so. But it happens most predictably and systematically around the formal review of life and ministry that each priest experiences every six years.

It is my privilege to review the materials generated by that process with each priest, to reflect with him on ways of deepening the positive aspects of his life and on ways of meeting the challenges raised by those who are kind enough to comment on his life and growth.

I am impressed by the way in which both the community and my brother priests participate in the process.

The reviewers invaluablely make their comments in a constructive fashion. They have a clear sense of reverence for the priestly vocation and a beautiful respect for our brother priests. They do offer suggestions for improvement and



A LONG THE WAY

growth, but in such a way that they can be peacefully heard and acted upon.

Our priests receive the comments of reviewers with a wonderful openness. As we all know, words suggesting that we're not always at the top of our game — or that we could stand to do better in this area or that — are not always the easiest ones to hear.

And sometimes one seemingly negative comment among 50 very positive ones seems much louder than the other 49. But I must tell you that these men are quite humble in the face of all of that input, and quickly focus on ways in which to serve in a more loving fashion.

I am particularly touched by the simplicity and honesty of their conversations with me. It is not easy to share struggles, vulnerability or weakness with another person — especially when that person holds a position of authority in your life.

But our priests consistently offer that trust to me, and I find it a powerfully liberating gift. It makes it easier for me to deal with my own weakness when others whom I admire so much share their own.

Such visits are one of the good fruits, I believe, of the church's ongoing self-reflection. If we are a people who at once share a common call to holiness and at the same time are ever in need of reform, then it is a life-giving gift to appreciate and encourage one another in our human struggles.

We are not a community in which some people by virtue of their office or position are holier than the rest. Rather, we are a community whose members all need the mercy and compassion of God each day.

Our God is rich in mercy and so very slow to condemn. To the degree that we are quick to judge, criticize or condemn, we imprison our sisters and brothers and do great damage to ourselves.

I thank our priests for sharing with me the rich and varied ways in which they have absorbed that truth and allowed it to inform their lives and behavior.

Peace to all.

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