

Priest prompts contemplation of future

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Last week I wrote about our baptismal call — expressed in such a strong way during the Advent season — to attend to the loving presence of God in all of the events of daily life, even in the very ordinary ones.

I have felt very close to you in that kind of prayer. Since I wrote those words I have begun each day with a prayer for the grace to find God in all things. At the end of each day I have taken the time to remember what happened in the hours between rising and bed time.

In those moments at the end of the day, I made no attempt to remember the day's events in chronological order. Rather, my practice has been to take some moments in peace and quiet to be with whatever memory happened to emerge. And, when one did emerge, I let it speak to me rather than try to analyze it or to figure out why it and not 50 other images came back to me. Let me offer an example.

One day last week I had the pleasure of leading a day of prayer for 75 priests of the Diocese of Manchester, New Hampshire. The day was filled with interesting experiences. I met many wonderful people, engaged in stimulating conversations and felt deeply engaged by the challenges and joys of the day's program.

At the end of the day, I was pleasantly tired and decided to pray on the airplane on the way home. As I sat on the jet and remembered the day in the way mentioned above, the memory that emerged most strongly was a fairly brief conversation I had with a priest of about 80 years of age.



A LONG THE WAY

Why did that particular memory and not one of several hundred others emerge from the day? I cannot answer that question. What I can do is tell you something of how the memory of the conversation with this good man spoke to me.

He was curious about *On Being a Priest Today*, a book to which I contributed a chapter on celibacy and to which I had made a reference during one of my talks. He spoke about his desire to read the book and about some of his other plans for the future. He was grateful for yesterday and excited about tomorrow, and he expressed a lively interest and genuine affection for the other priests in the gathering; this affection was especially evident toward the youngest members of the assembly.

As we moved through the night sky toward

Rochester and I let the memory of that good priest play in my heart, I began to relate the memory to a question I think about from time to time.

I put it to myself this way: If the present disciplines of the church continue, I will be the Bishop of Rochester until I reach my 75th birthday. If that is the case, I will have been the bishop of this diocese for 34 years. That is a long time by anyone's measure.

In and of itself such longevity is neither good nor bad. On the one hand one could make a persuasive case for continuity, growth in wisdom, an ever-deepening knowledge and understanding of the story of a people, etc. On the other hand, one could discuss getting into a rut, running out of ideas and the need for change both for a pastoral leader and for the community.

What I am sure of is that if I am to serve you for that number of years, I must — in fairness both to you and myself — continue to grow and develop. There is no question about that. To me that means — among other things — ongoing study, an openness to new ideas, a willingness to deal with the issues of the day and relationships that give life.

I am grateful for the memory of the priest from Manchester. He encourages me that it is possible to be lively and to grow through the years. He is proof that one need never stop being grateful for yesterday and excited about tomorrow. I'm glad about that because I love it here. I love you and find being your bishop a powerful source of life and growth. Thank you.

Peace to all.

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