

It's Sooner or Later

To a person who may disapprove of my departure from St. John's it has occurred to me to reply, "Well, it's sort of like death; it's sooner or later." I don't mean to be flippant with this response. And, it isn't as if I don't feel sadness and some anxiety about the matter. When these sorts of changes happen, we all feel this combination of emotions. It is unavoidable, for good or for bad, that the pastor tends to set the tone of parish life, and people become accustomed to a certain 'way' or a certain 'rhythm.' After nine years, it might be easy to forget that such an adjustment had to be made from the 'way' of Fr. Rick to mine. But, that too involved an adjustment.

None of us really cares for change if we are relatively comfortable. We even tend to say things like "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know." That old maxim assumes the worst case scenario, that you can only expect bad characters to assume leadership. But, generally speaking, we are all a mixed bag: We all have strengths and weaknesses, virtues and character defects. All relationships require a degree of flexibility: We can't expect a perfect fit for our own agendas or preferences. Ideally, we are laser focused, looking for the action of the Holy Spirit in our shared life as a parish.

I can really-only speak for myself, but leaving this community will be a kind of miniature death. And, like death itself, it is unavoidable and inevitable. Our spirituality guides us towards acceptance of this reality since Christ has transformed the "big D" into a passage that leads to new life. So too, the small deaths might be thought of as the "hands of the potter molding the clay," (Jeremiah 18). It isn't, necessarily, pleasant to be re-configured by change but it seems likely that this is one way the Lord refashions and refines our lives.

I fear that the culture has infiltrated the Church in ways inimical to our calling: Whereas St. Paul speaks of us as "the Body of Christ" wherein the lesser members are lifted up by the greater, our modern culture has supercharged individualism and a sense of entitlement to which we are all susceptible like a sort of virus. I have seen it in priests and, personally, I try to be alert to its insidious action in my own life.

In order to push back against these cultural contaminants, I like a suggestion by Bishop Robert Barron in a tome he had written well before becoming a bishop called *The Strangest Way*: The last chapter is entitled "***Realizing your life is not about you.***" In it he writes:

Only when we realize that our lives are situated in a context of a Life that stretches infinitely beyond them, only when we know that our wills are related to a Will that encompasses and surpasses the whole of the cosmos, are we ready to live.

Referring to the mystery of the Annunciation and Mary's receptivity to it, Barron relates the matter to the spirituality implied by the title of the chapter:

In other words, someone much more powerful than you will overwhelm your physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual capacities and, in the measure that you cooperate with this intervention, you will come to a life you hadn't imagined.

Upon first reading this, it occurred to me that it had already happened. I did not imagine the life I have lived when, as a teenager, I lay upon my bed staring at the ceiling and wondering, or, when on the main deck of a cold steel ship in the Gulf of Alaska, I wondered if that life really befit my character. And so, I suppose that I should expect a greater unfolding of the mystery in Centerville and you, remaining here in Freetown, the same.

In all honesty, it is daunting to me that I have to start all-over again in the effort to win the trust of a whole community, composed of a wide variety of personalities and dispositions. There is so much more "woundedness" in this world than when I was first ordained thirty years ago which manifests as neurosis, eccentricities, obsessiveness and other such perturbances. Immense graces are needed for compassion, patience and, indeed, love. This is the imperative of priest and parishioner alike: Love one another. It isn't the warm feeling of agreeing on everything or of perfect congeniality. It is, rather, always willing the good of the other person and having compassion for whatever is his or her woundedness.

Pray for me, and I will pray for you. I will not forget you and you will remain precious in my heart.