

Eternity lies around the bend in the road

*The following is an edited version of a column in the July 2010 issue of **In Stephen's Footsteps**, a newsletter published by the Office of the Diaconate.*

My wife's aunt died several months ago. She was quiet, kind, compassionate, a woman of love, a wife, mother and grandmother, an artist who saw beauty all around her, especially in the Virginia mountains where she lived so many years.

Forty years ago, she gave us an oil painting as a wedding gift. It is a treasure, not just because it is her handiwork, or because it is a scene near her family's weekend place where we spent our honeymoon, but it has enduring message of the truth and beauty of God's amazing love made manifest in Creation.

At the center of the painting is a country road. On the left is a barbed-wire fence enclosing a meadow. On the other side are green-leafed trees casting shadows on the road. In the middle distance are a farmhouse and a red-paneled barn. Far off are the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The road is gravel. Smooth and level in places, it's rough with bumps and holes and ruts in others.

As I look at the painting it speaks to me of life, of faith, hope and love, of goodness, truth and beauty.

The old farmhouse and barn give the scene a human dimension as they bespeak home, hearth and family, the continuity of generations. The barn and meadow tell a tale of hard work, cultivation and cattle-raising.

The fence, at first menacing and restrictive, gives depth and order to the vista. If only to keep his domestic beasts from wandering off, the fence is a sign of man's attempt to control his environment and keep nature in check. But the other side of the road grows wild and the branches of the trees reach out as if promising one day to return and cover the road and field.

It is the mountains in their mysterious majesty that rise in undisputed testimony to the awesome power of the Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. It is the mountains that stand in mute witness to the passing of the ages, to a seemingly endless stream of men and women in their worthy endeavors and their reckless follies.

But it is the road, the gravel road – some places rough and other stretches smooth -- that speaks to me of life with its times of difficulty and times of relative ease. The road seems to have no end as it gently curves and passes through the woods and into the mountains.

Our world is not perfect; despite all its beauty and magnificence, it is flawed by evil. Although we frail human beings are the highpoint in God's Creation, we know we are flawed and have an inclination to evil, a little bit of poison inherited from our first parents, that can lead us away from love and goodness, beauty and truth.

But God is love and He sent His only Son to live among us, to die for us and to call us to follow Him.

When I meditate on this painting, I invariably think of what is around the curve and recall the words of St. Paul: "We look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Cor 4,18)

Considering the beauty of Creation and life as we experience it now, even with all of its hardships, ruts and bumps, around the curve is Unfathomable Love, Eternal Truth and Unspeakable Beauty that eye has not seen, nor ear heard, and that is absolutely beyond our imagination. (cf. 1 Cor 2, 9)