

2 August 2009  
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## The Work of Ministry

This week I signed up for Social Security, to begin in October. It was an easy process, almost completely all on-line. Then I had to snail mail copies of a couple of documents and it was done. The psychological experience was more like an earthquake. For Americans, signing up for Social Security is a major life event, freighted with all sorts of meaning. It is the sacrament of retirement, the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. For each of us, retirement must mean a different thing, yet the commonality is that this is a new chapter of life, a new beginning in a real sense.

Many of you have been kind enough to ask what I intend to do in retirement. The answer is both fairly definite and fairly vague. I want to just sort of “float” for a few months, with little or no agenda. Having some experience with the Holy Spirit, I suspect that She will manifest some direction and suggestions if I give Her the space to speak and myself the stillness to hear. That’s what happened in the mid-Eighties on my sabbatical; there were results that came just from the freedom from the demands of vocation, time to be still, time to do things at whim, again to “float” as a balloon at the impulse of the wind. Out of that experience, came for me a consolidation of personality and direction and focus in work that has shaped my life ever since. I think the Wind of the Holy Spirit will speak again into the relative stillness that is coming.

That is the vague part. The somewhat definite part takes its cue from my personality. I am an inveterately curious person, as I think you have picked up from my sermonizing all these years. I am fascinated by God’s marvelous creation, both in itself and as a sign of God’s presence and purpose and person. Though I don’t *always* theologize, I do so frequently, and I expect that to continue. But before the theologizing comes the exploring, the peering into the wonders of our amazing universe and blue terrestrial ball. I read voraciously and widely. I am fascinated by several branches of science: astrophysics, cosmology, geology, psychology, biology, medicine. I am no less enamored of several periods and dimensions in history: British history in general and American history with particular attention to the Civil War, World War II, and social and cultural development throughout the life of our republic. From my youth I have loved music of most kinds but just never quite got around to learning to understand more than a surface enjoyment; now I want to spend more time listening and learning about this mysterious, beautiful expression of the human soul. I intend the same thing with poetry, the music of our language. I have enjoyed poetry for years, but, in spite of a good classical education, have lacked an understanding of the structures and energies that can reveal so much more. I suppose, as I think about it, that I will be doing this with “the arts” in general, especially painting. I am fascinated by how the artist infuses beauty and meaning into what she creates.

I am looking forward to a change in my prayer life and in worship. One of the ironies of being a priest is how difficult it is to find time for praying and worshiping. There is always something that needs attention, need that calls one away from attending in a conscious fashion on the Lord. I really hope to be able to do better at this in retirement. One recent discovery is how refreshing

it is to pray through the hymnody of our church. I have recordings of the complete New English Hymnal of the Church of England, over 500 hymns. I've put them onto my iPod and intend to pray in some unusual places.

Another part of my retirement regime is home. I am a real homebody. I enjoy the mundane mechanics of day-to-day living, keeping the house up, working in the yard, minding the dogs, and I want to learn to be a bit more creative in cooking. There's a certain aggravation factor in all this and yet I realize how much I miss it when I am away from home. Family is important to me, and I want to be more present to my family. Home also includes friends, being one and having some. I want to attend better to this important area of life.

Another sphere of activity will be volunteer work. I've thought about being a docent in a museum, reading books for the blind, exploring helpfulness in whatever parish I will worship in. And every retired priest is a resource for the bishop and the people of the diocese. I can be a supply priest on Sundays for priestly sickness or vacations. Every one of us has a self-image, whether conscious or subconscious, a way that we conceive of ourselves. I suspect that mine will always pretty much be priest, that is, bridge between God and creation, in whatever form that may arise. Much of the work of the diocese is done in volunteer committees, addressing different areas, lay people and ordained working together to do God's work; perhaps I can find one or two that could use my talents.

The more I think about it the more I realize that all these – and whatever else will come down the pike – are ways of doing what we have talked about for years: loving. Loving our God. Loving His creation. Loving our neighbor. Loving our enemy. Loving ourself. Being open to the wonder of life, which is a form of love in itself.

Well, all of this was prompted by a phrase from this morning's Ephesians reading, "the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ." (4.12) Retirement is still ministry, still the work of building up the Body of Christ.

The parish priest in me cannot resist putting this question to you: what is the work of ministry in your life? What will you offer in the weeks and months ahead to your parish church of Saint Andrew? Retired and still earning a living, each of us has gifts to offer for the common good, for the welfare of our nation, for the welfare of our church, for the welfare of our family. Our parish in this time of transition needs you, needs your support, needs your time and attention to accomplish several tasks in our process of calling a new rector, needs your patience and self-control in dealing with disagreements that will most certainly arise, needs your kindness toward your fellow parishioners (and toward yourself), needs your prayers for our parish community of faith, needs your patience in accepting the ministry of interim priests and eventually of a new rector. It will all be an adjustment, but one that we can make. Adjustment is a marvelous call; none of us ever wants to stop adjusting. There is a word for the state of not adjusting. That word is death. None of us is ready for death yet, no matter how much God has transformed death in the resurrection of Jesus. So let us heed the call for adjustment. It is God's holy work of ministry for each of us now and into the future. God bless us all in our work. Amen.