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A Good Life

Joe Ferullo | Jun. 9, 2009 NCR Today

This weekend my parish in Los Angeles began saying goodbye to the man who has been our pastor for twenty-eight years -- an astonishing stretch. Fr. Kevin Larkin will retire at the end of the month, and this past Sunday our parish celebrated a special Mass to honor his time with us.

Ten priests celebrated with him, including Fr. Tony Scannell, a Franciscan who has been on-loan to us for several years. In his homily, Fr. Tony focused on something I hadn?t heard spoken of in a very long a time: what a good thing it was to be a priest.

He recounted the changes in American life since Fr. Larkin took over as pastor (and since his ordination 50 years ago -- something else we celebrated this Sunday). Through this time, generations had literally grown-up with Fr. Larkin -- he had married couples, baptized their children, married those children, and in some cases, baptized the grandchildren. He was a central part of the human parade, and Fr. Tony spoke of the ?joy? the priesthood brought to him and to others. Of the eleven priests assembled, there was not one dry eye.

As I sat in the pews, I realized Catholics don?t hear much anymore about the joy and satisfaction the priesthood can bring. We hear of the scandals, naturally, but even beyond that, we often focus on the sacrifices of that choice, and the increasing loneliness as ranks dwindle.

I?m one of those American Catholics who wishes the church would open the priesthood to married men. The Greek Orthodox solution always struck me as solid -- a priest candidate has to be married before his final ordination (a process which takes many years). This serves two purposes: the priest candidate could see if, once married, he still wished to continue down the path to ordination. And the church doesn?t have to deal with the potential problems of a single man overseeing a congregation while also on the hunt for his perfect soul-mate.

But all that is beside the point for men like Fr. Larkin and Fr. Tony -- they made their choice with eyes open, and have kept moving forward. In their decades of service, they have played an extraordinary role in an uncountable number of lives; they can look back fifty years on and cherish the ?joy.?

I went up to Fr. Tony after Mass, and we chatted about his career as a priest. (He celebrated his Golden Jubilee last year.) Then he confirmed for me something I?d heard in the parish rumor mill -- after this month, he would not be returning to us. Two priests had retired at two other parishes he also served -- and he was needed there full-time to fill in the gaps. And there was that dark side of the priesthood cropping up again: too few to go around, too many retiring, not enough young men to talk their place -- the whole litany that?s been recited for a generation and more.

But Tony just shrugged -- he?d come back to our parish often, and would lead retreats during Lent and Advent. He?d many too many good friends here to stay away, felt too close to ever be too far. He gave me a broad smile -- it was all good, it would all be fine. Because come what may, there was the joy.

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