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Words of encouragement in a time of challenge

Denise Simeone | Jun. 24, 2010

(Julie Lonneman)

Essay

My dear brothers,

I have written this letter to you so many times in my imagination that I must now write it down. I have known you for all the years of my life. You blessed me in grade school and celebrated sacraments with my family. You inspired me in high school when you marched at Selma and stood against unjust war or government actions. You opened my eyes when you began dialogues with people of other religions and faith traditions. You set me on a course for ministry (though I did not know it then) when, as priests and seminarians, you gave testimony to your love of God in retreats and service that nurtured young adults.

You taught me to study theology in college and graduate school, challenging me to work at the study of who God is. Your continual guidance shaped the same pastoral skills in me that you so skillfully exercised. I worked beside you in parishes, diocesan teams, leadership committees and formation boards. You debated with me, listened and respected my opinions.

You trusted me with my first parish job. You encouraged me to believe God?s guidance in my life. You taught me collaboration. You allowed me to teach it to you. You let me touch your times of vulnerability and pain. You shared your stories and accepted mine. You were my mentors, my colleagues, my teachers, my students and my friends.

The call of the Lord and the longing to live the Gospel message with integrity and authenticity runs intensely in our bloodstreams. The energetic force of the Spirit compels us, prodding and igniting us. We share the same mission to proclaim the message of the good news to all whom we encounter. We share the same grace from

God and are held gently by the same hand of God.

Too often it was implied to you in formation that you would have it all together when you became ordained; there would be no more questioning or need for enlightenment because it would come to you like some magical force. We know this is not true. The same struggles that challenge all humanity confront you also. The same need for conversion haunts you.

You have faced the diminishing number of your own brothers from priesthood for a myriad of reasons. You ask yourselves why you choose to remain. You may sometimes look with longing at other life choices, wondering if you made the right one. These times of searing anguish are the paschal mystery, which is at the core of our faith. We proclaim it together every liturgy. Dying we come to have life and trust that Jesus? promise is still true today. When you face the dying and rising in your own lives, both acknowledging and embracing the pain and suffering, you spread hope among a weary people.

We have laid many meanings and many burdens on the lives of ordained ministers. The church itself, through the actions of its own leaders, has both enhanced and diminished your ministry as a priest. It has given you richness of tradition and strength of conviction. But the hierarchy has often expected loyalty at the expense of your allegiance to the Gospel mission, and sometimes has even forced you to compromise your own integrity in the face of the church?s defense. There have been times that religious officials and local bishops have even taken inappropriate punitive action against you because you have spoken your conscience or even simply disagreed with decisions. When some in the institutional church have erred by their conduct or management, you all have been tainted by association. I know how demoralizing and painful that has been for you.

You are a part of a structure that has sometimes missed the mark in its own struggle for faithfulness. It is often dysfunctional. Denial of anything wrong has been a strong practice in the church; it often does not understand its own need for conversion. The church is an instrument. It is not the reign of God. And like a body that has begun to fail in one of its organs, it can begin to fail in other parts of the body unless it seeks healing for itself. It is difficult to stand in the face of such power and authority when your formation has taught you to pledge it loyalty. You owe faithfulness to the Gospel even when it is difficult to discern. You must trust that God stays faithfully by your side in the wrestling. The way of Christ is a path of genuine growth and never-ending challenge. When you walk it with humility and faithfulness, you teach us to do the same.

Unlike the rich landowner of Luke?s Gospel, we know our true inheritance comes not from what we store for our future but from our relationship with God. The Gospel passages during August proclaim the urgency of following Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. Jesus? words strip away the insignificant distractions that we allow to block us from living his mission. The Gospel tells us that what is important is our willingness to stay in Christ?s company of disciples, knowing full well it leads to suffering and death, but confident it promises new life. You proclaim this message to us by the very integrity that your lives bring to these images. Call us to live radically different lives. Show all of us what we must also do. Your words to the entire company of believers, including yourselves, must compel us. The treasure we have is our relationship with God. It is that treasure you must help our hearts to follow.

You are witnesses to us as we are to you. My friends, we need you to ...

- Take care of yourselves. Too often I have seen you overworked, overweight and overburdened. I have watched you struggle with dependence on artificial means to overcome powerful emotions threatening to overwhelm you. I have seen you give away and squander your energy, time and gifts. I have known you respond unwaveringly to agonizing pastoral situations with the people for whom you care. You are often given the message that you cannot rest but must be present for all anytime. That kind of presence takes a toll. You must find the discipline and insight at your very core to take care of yourself.

- Make time to pray, reflect and retreat. In my years of work with you there were too few times that you were able to stand in the midst of your community and pray with them in the pews. You are always leading. Everyone asks you to offer prayer, say grace, speak a few words. It is exhilarating and exhausting. The gift of communal prayer is there are powerful ways to pray that are not eucharistic and allow you to participate as a believer among the assembly. Find them. Take sabbaticals so you come back with zeal like John the Baptist emerging from the desert. Go on retreat so you have time to be moved by God?s Spirit as Peter was in Cornelius? house in Caesarea.
- Trust the community has all the gifts it needs. You do not need to do it all. You get conflicting messages from your bishops, your brother priests and your communities. People think you have to be everything to everyone. You are pressed to say yes to one more parish, one more committee, one more task that is essential and can?t be done without you. You are given that message from the moment you enter the seminary. That kind of dependence can be astonishing, and it can eat you up. When people crowd you for more meetings, more decisions, more direction, find ways to let the administrative tasks go. There are many committed people who can care for parishes and exercise leadership so that you can be a spiritual life force in the community.
- Study the scriptures as if your life and your community?s life depended on it -- because it does. You are an energizing force in your communities. Your ability to preach with power and imagination grabs us all by our very bones and rattles us to pay attention to God?s word. If the Gospel message of God?s saving grace and shalom is to take hold in our lives and in the heart of our communities, it will do so because you allowed the word to shake your own spirit. Preach reconciliation so we can become reconcilers. Urge repentance and forgiveness so we can learn to loosen our own bindings of sin. Call us all over and over again to remember our baptismal call. Compel us to look to your life for the conviction to say, ?That?s what the baptized life looks like!? Be relentless. We know so little about the staggering mystery of God and how God interacts with us. Yet you resolve to study and allow the word to reach into your very life, to give you a new heart with all the wrenching and frightening images of open-heart surgery -- and this resolve of yours gives us hope that it can happen in our lives, too.

My brothers, I venture to speak in the name of so many who have been formed and cared for by you. Your ministerial choice of priesthood has enhanced response to your baptismal call to be among those who lead and shape the life of our parish communities. Yet the life of all disciples comes to fruition in mutual community and is dependent on our ability to consistently renew our call from God. I know your response to the Lord?s call has been: ?Here I am, send me.? I am eternally grateful you answered that call.

[Denise Simeone is a writer and consultant skilled at group facilitation, long-range planning and mission development. This essay also appears in the August 2010 issue of *Celebration* (www.CelebrationPublications.org), the worship resource of the National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company.]

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