

14TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
JULY 8, 2007

1

A little over a week ago on the last evening of our family vacation we all journeyed to the Amusement Park right off of Ocean City Boardwalk to ride the rides with our three year old niece, Cattie Bonnar. Upon our arrival we proceeded to the kiddy roller coaster, where Cattie and I rode it again and again and again. We sat in the front car and as we went down the little hills she would raise her tiny hands into the air with a big happy smile on her face. She loved it! And, of course, she did not want to leave.

As I stand before you this weekend preparing to depart and embrace a new assignment the sense of not wanting to leave is so real. This is a wonderful parish family and a top notch facility. And yet, our life as priests and for that matter as members of the church is never about wants but needs, which are always greater than our own.

Even before the announcement of Sister Dorothy's appointment, these last few months have been a roller coaster ride of emotions. The emotions are many and varied. The first emotion is one of excitement about ushering in something brand new in the life of this local church. You know I have always dreamed about building a new church. This experience in many ways has afforded me that opportunity, at least, from the groundbreaking standpoint. History will reveal how this change is both bittersweet and monumental and to think it all began right here at St. Bart's. The rest of the work is in the hands of Sister Dorothy and all of you. This is your moment!

The roller coaster of emotions continues with deep feelings of sadness. This has been home for BoBo and me. It is sad having to say good-bye and having to start over again. What is more, is the sadness I feel about the lack of vocations, which has necessitated the establishment of this new ministry. I do not understand why a young man would not want to be a priest. And given all the encouragement I received by my dear parents and siblings, it mystifies me why families cannot promote and foster priesthood. I love being a priest and there has been no greater joy in my life than being a priest. I challenge you to promote priesthood, to pray for priests and to pray for vocations. What Jesus says to his disciples in today's Gospel he says to us, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest."

Another emotion that has been part of these last few weeks is a bit of disappointment. Amid all of the reflections of these days I wonder about what more I could have done. I know I have done my best. And yet like a loving parent of a family it is disheartening when the children quarrel and refuse to forgive and forget. One of the main lessons I have felt compelled to teach and preach has been the power of forgiveness. If we want to know peace in this life, we must forgive. For the final time—forgive and forget. Let go and let God Rise above whatever it is and take the high road. And if I have offended any of you by omission or commission, I am sorry.

And if I can say one more word about disappointment I know that there is disappointment in some hearts about what is transpiring. For example, some may be disappointed that it is has come to this and or that I your Pastor have supported this model. One person, in fact, actually said to me, "Father, you sold us down the river." Well, no one is going down the river, but with all due respect, if I had to go down the river, I don't know of a more committed, gentle and loving traveling companion than Sister Dorothy. I hope that you will embrace her as you have embraced me.

Some I know are disappointed that they were not consulted about this change. First of all, let me remind you that the Church is not a democracy. She is governed by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, parishes are not consulted about clergy appointments which are made by the Bishop in consultation with the personnel board, for the needs of the church. And from the perspective of the church—there is no other parish in this diocese ready and able to make this model work than St. Bartholomew's. What a statement of affirmation for this parish family all of which leads to the next emotion--Pride

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2

I don't know about you, but as your Pastor for a few more hours I feel on overwhelming sense of pride at what we have accomplished together. That's right "we". It has been a total team effort encompassing the parish/school staff, the faithful. Even BoBo, my dog, has left his mark bringing a softness and lightheartedness to the parish. He has been good for me but he has been good for this parish, too.

So many dedicated hands and loving hearts have contributed to the success of where we are today. Of particular note I wish to acknowledge the efforts of our parish and school staff. We are well served by your presence and generosity. In addition we have a committed pastoral council and a very faithful finance council. I value your wisdom and insight. What we have all done together is phenomenal. In the past five years there have been an array of new ministries born like wedding coordinators, bulletin stuffers, green thumbs, funeral ministry, bereavement, Women' Group, Men's Club and opening our school to Wesley Spectrum to benefit autistic children. I do not know of a parish that in a short span of five years has conducted so many special financial projects. From operation red carpet, a campaign to update the convent to welcome the Sisters of St. Francis, to two capital campaigns raising close to \$200,000. To a beautification project which has realized \$21,000 to having a shower for Sister Dorothy when she moved to Penn Hills.

Five years ago when I arrived even though it was summertime it was no picnic. There had been a revolving door of priests coming in and out. There was a sharp divide about the music program. The school was \$50,000 over budget. The physical plant was in disrepair and—the walls—in church and rectory—even the carpeting was PINK. I do not care if I ever see pink again. At the same time, my father, my best friend, became sick and died on the heels of my mother's death. That was such a painful and difficult time, not to mention it was the height of the clergy misconduct crisis. It was not a good time to be a priest.

In the midst of that mess two things happened through the grace of God. First, after much prayer and consultation I began to develop a—vision—a plan for the parish. And you bought into it and trusted. And the rest is as they say, history. And because of that, the overwhelming sentiment in my heart today is gratitude to Almighty God for his grace.

In closing, I want to make a confession. I was not supposed to be your Pastor. Actually I was destined for a larger suburban parish. But in the eleventh hour that plan fell through. I want to confess to you that I was initially disappointed by that turn of events. The disappointment was not based on anything but the mere fact that St. Bart's wasn't what I wanted, but I trusted it was what the church needed. And looking back I could not be more grateful for the experience. I've become your family member and what a privilege it has been. After 397 funerals I have such a greater regard for life. And I have found that one of the worst realities anyone can live with is regret. That's why forgiveness is a daily call we must all embrace.

This scenario of my departure and the appointment of Sister Dorothy as PLC may not be what you want. I understand that given the fact that I did not want to come here. But it is what the church needs. And you know when we enter into God's plan great things happen. Just look around. And with all do respect to that what has been done—don't be fooled. There's more work ahead under the direction of the Holy Spirit in the person of Sister Dorothy. It will be a roller coaster ride, no doubt, but the Spirit is present and at work. Trust in it. And trust in your goodness, holding on to your forks in the belief that "The best is yet to be."