

Family matters

One generation really doesn't know previous ones. A few anecdotes make that point.

Recently I was talking to a friend now in her 80s. Betty told me about her childhood. By the time her mother was 36, she already had 14 children. The family grew to 16 children.

They lived in a row house in Highlandtown. Each day the mother would rise early, and go to the daily 5 a.m. Mass at their parish. It was run by a religious order, and Betty recalls there being 25 priests at the parish.

The mother would return home, wake up and feed all the kids, get them off to school and then go about her daily duties. Betty remembers her childhood as a happy time.

"There was always someone to play with," she said. Two or three of the children would sleep in the same bed. It was a crowded home, but a happy one.

Betty herself became a nun. As with many large families, it was not uncommon to have a son or daughter become a priest or a nun. There were plenty of other children to provide grandchildren for Mom and Dad.

Today we don't so much have a vocation problem as we do a population problem. There are simply not enough large families to provide numerous vocations. I don't know of any parish today with 25 priests.

Few people would go to college in those days. Many didn't even go to high school. People would find work as laborers or in offices. Expectations were very limited as well. Having survived the Great Depression, and living during or after two World Wars, people were happy just being alive.

Faith was important at that time. Catholics would identify themselves by the parish they belonged to.

Now I don't think many couples plan on having 16 children. Given the cost of everything, it would require a fortune to raise and educate such a family. I actually

feel sorry for young couples trying to make sense of life today. All of the messages coming at them must be very confusing.

When I saw pictures of young women celebrating after anti-abortion laws were voted down in Ireland, I felt not judgmental, but sad.

It used to be clear that life was a gift and a miracle, and that the gift of life was one of the highest ideals. A “choice” to end a developing life seems like such a sad one. Religious values were once of utmost importance. Today, one study shows that only 14 percent of baptized Catholics actually practice their faith.

Our culture is hard on faith. In the name of freedom of choice, we are arguably becoming one of the least free societies. The advertising industry bombards us with messages of how we should look and feel, what we should wear, and on and on. People who want to be free from a church telling them what to do seem quite content to allow someone else to tell them what to do.

Faced with all these challenges, you and I are not called to despair, but called to prayer. A wise person once said: “The only Bible some people read will be the lives of other people.” We need to ground our lives in love, trusting that love will indeed change the face of the earth.