

# Forever alive in the presence of God

By the time this column appears most of the leaves will be gone. But right now I'm watching the few remaining leaves fall to the ground. Here and there, there are still trees with bright red leaves on them – burning bushes, so to speak, of the presence of God.

As I watch the leaves swirling around, I'm reminded that the leaves will come again in spring. There will be new leaves. But these particular leaves will never be back. They literally return to the earth. The leaves remind me of us.

Right now there are 7 billion of us humans on this planet. But it's safe to say that in about 100 years none of us will still be here. We 7 billion people will have been replaced by billions of others.

The ending of the church's liturgical year and the beginning of the new church year with the season of Advent is an opportunity to reflect on the passage of time and the passage of us. Like the leaves, we will pass. There will be no memory of us. Where will we go?

One of my favorite parables about life was told by Father Anthony de Mello. He said, "Ask yourself who stood or sat where you are sitting or standing right now. What do you know about any individual on this particular spot 10,000 years ago? The answer, obviously, is nothing. Then fast forward 10,000 years and ask what anyone on this same spot will know about you or me. The answer, again, is nothing. Like this year's leaves we will be gone and forgotten.

But, not quite. Yes, we will be lost to all human memory. But you and I will not be lost. Our earthly bodies, our human egos, our reputations and personal images will all be lost. But who we are can never be lost. We will be forever dead in the eyes of the world, and forever alive in the presence of God. Ten thousand years from now, and 10,000 times 10,000 years from now, the same God who loves us will still love us. We will be fully alive in God's presence.

Recently, we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the death of Monsignor Ed Manalis. We observed the first anniversary of the death of Father Tom Polk. These men were

wonderful leaves on the tree of life – leaves that offered shade, and comfort and life – and then passed on. Their noble sisters and families keep their noble memories alive. Where they have gone we will surely follow, although I'm not so sure I'll get as high a place in heaven as them.

Where did they go? They went where we all go – to the light! And that's why the Christmas star is so important. In Advent we look forward. We look to life ahead. We look to the star that guided shepherds and wise people to Christ.

In a dark sky, and in a dark world, the light that is Christ shines just a little brighter. There is always hope. The darkness does not win. Death does not win. Life wins. There is a new liturgical year because there is a new life lying in a manger. And yes the wood of the cross is never far from the wood of the manger. That little life will have a fairly tragic life measured by human standards – a life of misunderstanding and rejection and crucifixion.

But that life will also have the most magnificent life possible. God will have come in human form to let us know love conquers all the tragedies of life. And God will come in human form to let us know that when we allow God's love to fill our lives, then God comes again in our human form.