

His gaze never turns away from us

When I left St. Mary's in Hagerstown to head east and over the mountain to begin service as a pastor at St. Anthony Shrine in Emmitsburg and Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Thurmont in July 2016, I experienced something unusual - something I had not yet experienced in my 14 years as a priest.

As I was moving into rectory and unpacking my boxes, I quickly came to the realization that for the first time not only in my priesthood but also in my life I would be living alone. Unlike my other priest assignments, I would have no other brother priests to live with.

So, as I was walking around the large, green and grassy campus of St. Anthony's, located right next to Mount St Mary's University, I thanked God for the serenity and knew I would have much time to pray. But I also felt I needed a companion. Since there were no other priests coming my way I decided for the next best thing. With the help of my family, I bought a small, priestly black Pomeranian puppy. I named him "Otto" - which rhymes with "Grotto" and is named after St. Otto, the missionary apostle of the European country Pomerania from years ago.

(I have written other blogs about him, but there's a point and story I'm getting to here. Be patient with my "Otto love-fest.")

Otto's now almost 16 months old. He has grown to a giant 10.9 pounds, and his poofy black hair reminds one of that once donned by many an '80's big-hair hard-rock band frontman. Yes, he's been a great blessing to me. He's super energetic, friendly to both dog and man, and he has to be in the top 10 cutest dogs in Maryland. And, amongst priest dog owners, I think he's right at the top (well, okay, maybe a grudging "tie" for first with Bayley, Archbishop Lori's good dog.)

When I first got him, I quickly learned how much he wanted to be "attached" to me as his new owner. This for the most part hasn't changed. Whenever I leave the room, he follows me. And sometimes when I sit and write homilies, for example, he just sits at my feet, looking at me, gazing at me, or he takes a short nap. When I leave, and place him in his crate in the rectory, he sometimes still will whine and whimper and

stare at me as I leave (though I must admit that has gotten much better.) But he still has what dog owners call “separation anxiety.” He always wants to be in my presence; so whenever I return he greets me with about 100 licks on my face and with his super-happy little smile!

Often when I walk him up to the grotto, I find it to be great prayer time. And in these times God has used Otto to teach me about himself. When Otto sits at my feet and humbly looks up at me, his master, it often reminds me that God is constantly looking upon me in love, from above. With God, no matter how good or bad I may be feeling on any particular day, no matter what I may have done, good or evil, I am never alone. God’s gaze never turns away from me or you, even though we often turn away from him because of our brokenness and our choice of sin.

When we become self-focused, we are like the scribes and the Pharisees who became full of themselves instead of humbly making room for God in their hearts (cf. Matt 23:1-12, from Sunday’s Gospel.)

There are some biblically-minded people who object to calling priests “father” based on the passage “Call no one on earth your father, you have but one Father in Heaven” (Matt. 6:9). Some even think it is sinful to do so. But actually Jesus is not opposed to anyone calling me “Father Collin” or referring to any other priest as “father” or “monsignor” – or even referring to Pope Francis as the “Holy Father.”

What he opposes is a form of selfish vanity, being “full of one’s self”- a drawing of attention to one’s practice of religion and worship for the sake of receiving the praise of men, of those around us rather than the approval of God. It is that often-subtle, tempting desire of honor, popularity, attention and status, the desire of “being noticed” rather than having the humble honor and blessing and quiet notice of God. He is the one we serve, not ourselves, our own pride, vanity. When we discover this, it is the beginning of true spiritual freedom.

Jesus showed us by his own life that “the greatest among you must be your servant.” (Matt 23:11). We are wise to pray for the grace of a humble, joyful, servant love. Being a humble servant is living out the wondrous, mystical reality that God’s gaze never turns away from us.

