

# Grateful for faithful examples

Recently we've heard tragic stories from the "dark side" of priestly ministry. I'd just like to share a happier story.

I grew up in Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in Essex in the 1950s. There were more than 1,000 kids in Our Lady of Mount Carmel grade school. There were Franciscan nuns in almost every classroom, and four priests in the rectory. This was the "golden age" of vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

My favorite priest was Father Francis Wagner, who had served as a paratrooper during World War II. He was in charge of the altar boys, so I had a lot of contact with him. I liked being an altar boy, especially because I could get out of school to serve funerals, and I could make a few dollars serving weddings - that is, if the couple was generous.

One of my favorite memories from that time was when I went to confession to Father Wagner one Saturday afternoon. I tried to disguise my voice so he wouldn't know who it was on the other side of the curtain. At the end of confession, he said: "Hey Joe, I've got a wedding Sunday afternoon. Can you serve?" So much for guises and disguises.

He looked out for altar boys in various ways. Of course, there was the annual altar boys picnic every summer. Then there were tickets to Oriole games at Memorial Stadium. Going to Oriole games was like going to heaven.

One of the special games to which we got tickets was Interfaith Night. All religions and service organizations would come together and pack the stadium. Once my brother, Bill, and I noticed a group of kids being given free hot dogs and cokes. We sneaked into the group, and got some free food too. We were opportunistic, as well as hungry. When they tried to load us onto their buses we ran like heck.

It turns out that this group was sponsored by Boumi Temple. I've always had a soft spot in my heart for their service. Plus I owe them for a hot dog and drink. I hope they don't charge interest.

The other game to which we always went was Holy Name Night. Virtually every parish had a Holy Name Society. The stadium was packed. I used to love serving at Benediction for the Holy Name Society. I remember my heart swelling with pride at the verses: "Fierce is the fight, for God and the right!"

Yes, the Holy Name Society served hot dogs and cokes after their meetings, too. I stayed for the food. The ladies' Sodality only served pastries.

I realize I'm talking more about food than Father Wagner, but he was at the center of so much that was good in my early life. He even had his own plane, and would take us for rides. He also inspired us to want to be priests, like him.

When my brother graduated from grade school, five boys in his class went to the minor seminary at St. Charles in Catonsville. In my class, four of us went to the seminary. No, not all persevered through 12 years of seminary. Not all persevered in the priesthood. But all gave years of their youth and young adulthood to praise and serve God.

It's good to remember the many, many good priests who inspired such generosity. Thanks to all of you.