

More mountains to climb

I have a distinct memory of sitting in the study hall at St. Charles in Catonsville in 1959, my first year of high school seminary, and thinking, "Wow! I'll help the Catholic Church to move into the 21st century."

In my youthful idealism I romanticized the church of the past, surviving persecution and prejudice, and imagining I would be a part of it surviving communism and other threats to its existence in the future.

I could not have imagined the turbulent decade that lie in front of us - the decade of the great civil rights movement and multiple anti-war protests. The sure, steady church that I knew from the 1940s and '50s was about to be challenged dramatically by society.

The same church would be challenged internally by the dramatic developments of Vatican II. I, who had grown up going to Mass exclusively in Latin, would spend 40 years of my priesthood celebrating Mass exclusively in English. The church that I was ordained into in 1971 wanted to engage the world, to bond with other religions, to reach and change the world. It wanted to be relevant to the pain of the world and to people in their everyday lives.

As I noted last week, this Sunday, May 15, I will celebrate the 9 and 11 a.m. Masses at Church of the Annunciation in Rosedale. It's the exact date on which I was ordained 40 years ago.

It's a vastly different church than the one I was ordained into. Where once there were many priests, today there is a shortage of priests. Once packed churches have now been closed or clustered. Schools run by nuns are gone now. So are many of the nuns! Who could have predicted this turnaround?

Yet, I'm comforted by some remarks that the great Scripture scholar, Father Ray Brown, once made. He said that we have something important to learn from the Old Testament. At one time there were 12 tribes of Israel. Today there is just one tribe - Judah - the Jews. Yet the people of Israel are no less God's people today than they were before.

The same is true of the church. While we have experienced shrinkage, we are still no less God's people. And our history teaches us that there have always been periods of great losses and great gains. Who's to say that 40 years from today, new churches won't be built, and priestly and religious vocations will again flourish in the church? As Mother Teresa put it so well: "We are not called to be successful. We are called to be faithful."

Recently, I celebrated Mass at Oak Crest. As I raised the chalice, I could see my vestments reflected in the chalice but not my face. It was then that it became so clear that the priesthood is eternal but the priest is not! Countless hands have held the Body and Blood of Christ in the centuries before me, and countless hands will do the same for centuries into the future. The church grows young in every age.

The "romantic" vision that I had of the church in those early days of seminary would surely be tested in the crucible of real life ministry. There were times when I considered leaving the priesthood, and even leaving the church. But the words of Psalm 16 always halted me: "He has put into my heart a marvelous love for the faithful who dwell in his land." I could never leave the people that I love to minister to.

Years ago, in a talk to his brother priests, the late Father Ray Gribbin summed it up pretty succinctly: "Some men feel compassion for themselves and leave. Others feel compassion for the people and stay."

Two stories stand out in my memory. One was when I was first ordained and was called to the hospital to anoint a dying man. As he looked up from his bed he said: "Father Joe, it's a wonderful thing you're doing with your life!" His words sustained me through many a dark night.

The other story refers to my radio show. It aired locally on WPOC-FM and was carried for most of those 33 years by about 300 stations around the nation, including the Armed Forces Network. All, of course, for no salary.

Right after Paulist Communications began syndication, I received a letter from California, addressed: "Fr Joe. WPOC. Baltimore."

The letter began: "I don't know who you are. But last Sunday I had decided to kill myself. I picked out the bridge that I was going to drive my car into. By habit, I turned on the radio at 5 a.m. I heard your show for the first time in my life. Your theme that day was 'Things That Make Us Feel Crazy.' As I listened to your show, I realized that I couldn't kill myself. Thank you."

That one letter was the reason that I did the show for no salary. I felt that I had already been paid.

Not all ministry is successful. There are surely things I regret, and surely things I would do differently. But I don't regret risking my life for God. Some people have to climb Mount Everest for reasons known only to them. Others climb mountains of ministry, for reasons known only to God!