

# Only God knows what choices are right, wrong

I have to confess that I was deeply moved when I read in the obituary: "At the time of his death, his much beloved dog was with him." Herb Derwart has died.

I met Herb in 1959 at St. Charles Minor Seminary in Catonsville (Charlestown today). Of the 110 students that entered that first year of high school, only six of us persevered through 12 years to ordination in 1971: Monsignor Ed Miller, Father Blair Raum, Father Bob Aubrey, Bill Kristofco, Herb and myself.

When people ask where I was during the momentous time of the 1960's - Civil Rights Movement, anti-war protests, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the urban riots, etc. - I reply: "I was in the seminary."

Much good occurred during the 1960s, especially the recognition of the rights of minorities. Responding to the riots led Bill and Herb and Father Blair and Monsignor Miller to dedicate their priesthoods to urban ministry.

Much chaos came from that same era. Every authority - state or church, civil or religious - was questioned, and often presumed to be wrong. This breakdown of faith in authority led to the "sexual revolution" when every sexual moral teaching was challenged, and often rejected.

As priests we were not immune to such chaos, nor any better prepared for it. As one classmate, who later became a tenured college professor, put it, "When we left St. Charles, we were well prepared for the 13th century." This was not just a whimsical comment. We were given a classical education about to face a chaotic society.

The exodus of priests and nuns from the religious life stressed all of us. Often the men who had inspired us to want to be priests were now leaving the priesthood. Seminary rectors and teachers who had prepared us for priesthood were no longer priests. Spiritual directors and confessors, who had guided us in our formation, had guided themselves a different direction. The chaos caused all of us profound soul searching.

Herb was not immune to such influences. He left the priesthood. Later he would marry, and later, also divorce. Herb's journey was not an easy journey. But, as Father Chris Whatley noted in his eloquent homily and eulogy at the funeral: "Herb ceased to function as an "official" priest, but he never stopped being a priest." You are a priest forever!

So Herb, like Jesus, gathered a huge following of friends. And like Jesus, who was accused of "eating and drinking" with the wrong people, Herb ate and drank with the right people. At McNabb's funeral home, filled with friends, the first person I met was Mag. She was a waitress at the Canton Tavern. She knew Herb's drink - a martini with a twist of lime. I think.

If you knew Herb, you had to like him. As his obituary noted, he had a "host of friends". Interesting isn't it? Herb, who would have consecrated many a host as priest, also brought a host of people into communion with him.

Life is easy for none of us. All of us can second-guess our decisions, and beat ourselves up over various choices. But that is all wasted energy. All God asks of us is to learn from those mistakes and make better decisions.

And ultimately, only God knows what choices really were right or wrong for us. God does write straight with crooked lines. To be who we are we had to be who we were and do what we did. Our "good" decisions can lead us to appreciate God all the more, and our "bad" decisions teach us compassion for the failings of others. As a holy lady recently quoted to me, "Those who mind don't matter, and those who matter don't mind!"

It was a humble band of priests that gathered for Herb's funeral at St. Mark's in Catonville: In addition to Father Whatley, there were Monsignors Ed Miller, Carl Cummings, and Bill Burke, and Father Mike Roach and myself. Yes, the much beloved Hartnett sisters were there. So were Herb's brother, sister, nephews and nieces. And a host of friends.

Interestingly, in a famous poem, God is pictured as the Hound of Heaven, chasing us down the "labyrinthen ways" to catch us in order to tell us that God loves us. How fitting that the hound of earth was with Herb until the Hound of Heaven could take

him home!