

Prayers connect us to God

A very holy Irish Priest once said: “If you want to know what the church believes, watch how the church prays.” Yes, the Bible, creeds and catechisms are important. They give us intellectual concepts *about* God. They are the fingers that point toward God.

Our prayers, however, combine intellect and feelings, our heads and our hearts. Our prayers connect us to God.

On this past All Souls Day, I used the fourth preface for funeral liturgies. I may never have prayed that preface before in all of my 38 years as a priest. Allow me to quote the heart of that preface: “Father, all powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks.

By your power you bring us to birth.

By your providence you rule our lives.

By your command you free us at last from sin as we return to the dust from which we came.

Through the saving death of your Son we rise at your word to the glory of resurrection.”

Wow! Does that sum up life or what?

“By your power you bring us to birth” We didn’t have to exist. God didn’t ‘owe’ us life. It’s pure gift. It’s all gift! That’s why it’s always and everywhere “well to give you thanks.” We are creatures called into existence. It’s all gift.

“By your providence you rule our lives.” There have been times when I wondered about that providence. Having been born poor, in a single parent family, my father and sister, Margaret, dealing with schizophrenia, my own health issues with strokes in my eyes, and blood clots in my legs, and a variety of other issues, I have questioned providence. Yet, the one thing that seems clear to me today from the view of older age is that it had to be that way. Despite my flaws, there is one

singular gift I have, and that is compassion, the capacity to identify with the pain of others. Sometimes that identification can lead to over-identification. But mostly folks are comforted when I am able to be with them in their pain.

When I think of the marvelous people in my life, my sister Helen and brother in law, Mike, amazing families and friends that have stood by me through thick and thin, I know the hand of God, providence, has been at work in my life.

As I've said before, providence is most clearly seen through our rearview mirror, rather than through our front windshield. Going through tough times we wonder where God is. Looking back we see his loving presence always with us.

For us to be who we are, we had to experience what we experienced.

"You free us at last from sin as we return to the dust" From a human point of view, death is mostly seen as a tragedy. Seen through the eyes of God, death can be deliverance from the power of darkness, limitation and the compulsions and addictions of our mortal body.

"We rise to the glory of the resurrection." In death we step from this three-dimensional world into a fourth dimension. That dimension seems so filled with joy and peace, that consistently people who have had near-death experiences are reluctant to return.

In this season of Advent, it is good to know that the God who would come down from heaven would be Emmanuel - "God with us," not God against us! Our religion gives us more than just beliefs about God. Rather, we learn prayers that remind us that we are always connected to God. Advent is a time to remember that again.