

Priests bring different gifts

In this Year of the Priest, I have written about various priests who have touched my life. How could I allow the year to end without remembering Monsignor Marty Schwalenberg and Father Jack Hooper?

Father Schwalenberg was arguably the most popular priest in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. He was team chaplain for the Orioles when the Orioles were in their glory days. He received Brooks Robinson into the church. As you may have noticed, these past years have not been great for the Orioles. Pray to St. Marty for help!

Father Schwalenberg was also team chaplain for the Baltimore Colts, when the Colts were winning championships, and losing heart-breaking games to the Green Bay Packers! In those days, we went to church in the morning but we worshipped in the afternoon on Sundays when the Colts played.

Marty may also have been chaplain to the Baltimore Bullets, the basketball team, but I'm not sure about that. But he did know their coach, Gene Shue, well.

Father Marty seemed to be everywhere. He was chaplain for the National Guard as well as the Maryland State Police. Where two or three gather, Father Schwalenberg could usually be found in the midst of them.

His ministry was not just to the rich and famous. He never lost touch with the common folk. Every morning after Mass he would read the obituaries, and every evening he could be found visiting various funeral homes, bringing comfort to family and friends of the deceased.

I used to accuse him of having a 'vampire' complex. As the sun would set, he would go out. He usually beat the sunrise home.

If you should ever be on a plane that has to crash land in the remote jungles of the Amazon, and you should awaken to find yourself surrounded by some unknown tribe, don't panic. Just say: "I'm a friend of Father Schwalenberg!" Immediately they will smile and welcome you: "Hey, they know Father Schwalenberg! Can you stay for supper?"

Father Jack Hooper was an equally popular and well-loved priest. I often think of Jack as the very best that the 'old' seminary training could produce. In the high school and college seminary everybody played every sport. Jack was good at all of them. In his forties he would be playing football with young men in their 20s!

Jack used his love of sports to reach out to young men. I don't know how many priests could trace the beginning of their vocation to Father Hooper, but I'm sure there were a lot of them.

Unlike Father Schwalenberg, who received a blessing of years, Father Hooper's life was tragically cut short. While playing handball he went into cardiac arrest. He was only in his 40s.

He was pastor at the time at Sacred Heart Parish in Glydon. The entire parish was in a state of shock and disbelief.

Father Hooper was a prince of a man, a man's man and a priest's priest. Likewise, Monsignor Schwalenberg. While their personalities were quite dissimilar, their ministries were equally effective. Both put the needs of others first.

As time passes, each generation forgets the previous generation. Other than a few impressions and a few stories, we all fade from memory. Perhaps that is as it should be.

However, as you think of these two priests, pray for the priests that have touched your life. Pray for all priests. We all serve in our own time in our own way. Our gifts are different, but our hearts are the same. We try to carry within us the heart of Christ so that others will come to know the compassion and love of Christ.