

Reflecting on 40 years of priesthood

Forty is a number of biblical significance - Jesus spent 40 days in the desert and for 40 years the people of Israel wandered in the desert.

Forty years of priesthood has special significance for the ordination class of 1971. Those celebrating 40 years include: Monsignors Ed Miller and Tom Phillips; and Fathers Larry Frazier, Mike Roach, Joe Bochenek and myself. Those celebrating in heaven include: Fathers Don McMaster, John Delclos, Blair Raum, Chris Carney, and Joe Kaiser. Two others who were ordained that year include Bill Kristofco and Herb Derwart, who now serve God as laymen.

I could brag about my classmates for hours - great men who have done great things for God in a humble way. They will all have various celebrations of their own.

As to myself, I feel strangely lost for words - a most unusual state. I will have two humble "celebrations." Monsignor Jarboe has invited me to celebrate the 11 a.m. Mass on May 8 at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen (5300 N. Charles St.), and Father Tom Walsh has invited me to celebrate the 11 a.m. Mass at Church of the Annunciation in Rosedale (5212 McCormick Ave.) on the following Sunday, May 15 - the actual date of my ordination. I have lived at the cathedral for nearly 28 years. Bishop Newman was kind enough to invite me. Monsignor Armstrong was kind enough to keep me. Monsignor Jarboe has continued the kindness.

Annunciation Parish has been my "week-end" assignment for almost as long. Monsignor Aiken asked me to help, and Fathers Carney, Foley and Walsh have continued the invitation. I have lived vows of "stability" even though I didn't take any.

What I feel most profoundly at this time is a sense of gratitude. Gratitude, obviously, to God. God does indeed have a profound sense of humor. How else could you explain God's choosing me?

In addition I feel profound gratitude to you - to you who read this column, who have listened to my radio show, who have come to various retreats, missions and talks. Your kindnesses and support and caring have not only saved my ministry, but saved

my life. If I would dare to name any names I must name my sister, Helen Eder, her husband and my brother-in-law, Mike, and my lifetime best friends (since 1959) Bill Kristofco and Monsignor Ed Miller – and Monsignor Jeremiah Kenney. These have journeyed with me in dark valleys and anxious moments that no one else shared.

Were there surprises in my priesthood? Yes, the most obvious ones being that I spent most of my priesthood doing what I never expected to do. After 12 years of seminary (St. Charles College, St. Mary's Paca Street and St. Mary's Roland Park), I found myself back in school shortly after ordination. I was well prepared in Scripture and dogma and liturgy but people weren't asking those questions. They were asking: "Why did my baby die?" "Why did my spouse leave?" So I spent two years studying at the Institute of Pastoral Psychotherapy, a program that predated Loyola's Pastoral Counseling Program. Many of my faculty joined Loyola.

The most surprising part of my ministry was the time I spent at WPOC doing my radio show. My show still continues on HD radio, but not on the regular broadcast signal. For 33 years, for no salary, I did that weekly half hour program. You may or may not want me as your spiritual director. You definitely don't want me as your financial adviser.

On one occasion when I shared that "secret" with another priest, he was flabbergasted. "Why the heck did you do the show?" he blurted out. I responded that it probably had something to do with my understanding of God. I don't think any of the great saints drew a large salary. So while I was not always one to imitate their sanctity, I could at least imitate their poverty.

Do I have regrets? Yes, I who "taught" others to take care of themselves have not always taken great care of myself. The strokes in my eyes that took much of my vision, and the blood clots that almost ended my life indicate some lack of self-caring. A weekly radio script, this weekly column, a weekly sermon, plus other talks and counseling were probably a bit too much.

I apply to myself the words of Shakespeare: "He loved not wisely but too well." So if I had to fail I would prefer to fail on the side of love. There is a precedent in our faith for laying down your life for others.