

This Priest Appreciation Day, thank priests who change lives

Father Dale Picarella had just finished greeting a mob of parishioners at the end of Mass when I approached him in the sacristy with a special request. Would he visit my mother at Bayview Medical Center in East Baltimore as she was recovering from cancer surgery?

Knowing the incredible demands on priests these days, I anticipated that even if he could carve out some time in his schedule, it might take the popular cleric several days or more to arrange the visit. Much to my surprise, minutes after hanging up his liturgical vestments, Father Picarella jumped in his car and was on his way to the hospital.

My mother was shocked and delighted to see Father Picarella's smiling face at her bedside. He brought words of comfort and the assurance of God's love to a woman who was scared. Then the associate pastor of St. Clare in Essex, Father Picarella represented the wider faith community - letting a member of Christ's body know she wasn't forgotten.

The day my mother lost her battle with cancer, Jan. 13, 1999, Father Michael Carrion, then St. Clare's pastor, dropped what he was doing to anoint her before her chest rose and fell a final time. The white-haired priest gave me an olive-wood rosary from the Holy Land that my mother now holds forever at her place of rest.

Father Carrion and Father Picarella concelebrated the funeral Mass, joined at the altar by other friends of the family - Redemptorist Father John Lavin, Redemptorist Father Andrew Carr and Monsignor Thomas Tewes. As my father said at the time, it was quite a sendoff.

As Priest Appreciation Day approaches June 2, I'm reminded of the critical role priests have played in my life and the lives of hundreds of thousands of Catholics throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Priests are with us in good times and bad, ministering in ways seen and unseen.

They are often overworked and pulled in many directions, yet they serve with faithfulness and love.

I think of Father Carr, former associate pastor of the now-closed St. Michael in Fells Point, sprinkling holy water throughout my home in Owings Mills when I first moved in - translating the rite on the fly from a Latin prayer book.

More recently, I was moved by how Redemptorist Father Robert Wojtek, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Highlandtown, thoughtfully prepared a homily that expertly tied together the readings my wife, Treasa, and I had selected for our wedding at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We were also blessed at our wedding by the presence of Monsignor Arthur Valenzano, the basilica's rector and a model of holiness who inspires people every day by showing us how to face a life-threatening illness with courage and faith.

I smile when I think of joyous priests such as Father T. Austin Murphy at Our Lady of Hope in Dundalk and St. Luke in Edgemere, and Father Matthew Buening at St. Paul, Ellicott City, men who know how to laugh and get others to laugh with them.

There are countless other priests I've known who daily preach the Gospel in word and deed.

If your life has been changed by a priest, thank him June 2. But don't leave it there. Let him know how much he matters throughout the year.

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