

# When are you going to have a baby?

As we were waiting to become parents – and before we started our adoption journey – we often found well-intentioned, caring people asking us whether we were planning to have a baby sometime soon. Sometimes I was able to understand that people were just curious. More often I came away from the conversations feeling sad or angry.

One exchange was completely different. That was the one we had with our good friend Father Tom.

I first met Father Thomas Pietrantonio, a Capuchin Franciscan priest, in the summer of 2003. I had had a difficult few weeks. We had had to put our family dog, Flurry, to sleep, and I had ended a relationship. Feeling confused and hurt, I decided to make a retreat, and I found the St. Francis Renewal Center in Wilmington, Del. For a small fee – I think it was \$35 for the weekend – I would have my own space, meals, and room to think and to pray.

When I arrived that Friday evening, a short man with a white beard, overalls, and a well-worn white shirt greeted me. He had the gentlest smile. He asked no questions. He gave me a friendly hug, told me he was glad I was there, and showed me around the center – a beautiful large stone house.

Over the course of that weekend, I got to know Father Tom well. He introduced me to his carpenter's workshop and pointed out the chipmunks and squirrels on the property. We sat on the porch and watched butterflies. And he gave me time to be alone. I never explained to him why I had wanted to make a retreat. I found I didn't need to. After Mass that Sunday, one of the members of his congregation – who had just sung the most magnificent version of "How Great Thou Art" in the chapel – turned to Father and asked him whether dogs go to Heaven.

"I don't see why they wouldn't," Father Tom told him, as we sipped our coffee together. "They're God's creatures and our friends."

It was not a surprising answer from a Franciscan, but it was still comforting – and just what I needed to hear.

After that visit, I returned home, more at peace and wondering where God would lead me. A

few weeks later I met the man who would become my husband. When we were looking ahead to our marriage, I told John I wanted him to meet Father Tom. They connected immediately.

Father Tom was 78 when we got married, but he made the drive to Baltimore to concelebrate our wedding. He gave the most beautiful blessing over the food at the reception – one of the few moments of that blurred day that stands out with clarity.



It was on one of our later visits to Father Tom that the topic of children came up. He brought it up, but it was nothing like the conversations I had had with others.

There was no pressure, no prying. There was no offer of medical advice or even encouragement to pray to St. Gerard. There wasn't even curiosity – just genuine caring.

He merely smiled and asked whether he could pray that God would send us a child.

Of course, we said yes.

During that visit, Father Tom also asked if he could introduce me to a group of women making a retreat there. They were connected to Project Rachel and each – I believe – had experienced loss through abortion. When he introduced me, he asked them – in a very simple, matter-of-fact way – to join us in prayer for a child for John and me.

I was so moved – and uplifted. Suddenly it seemed that we had the strength of others' prayers behind us – and without having to ask or give personal details.

This week is National Infertility Awareness Week. As meaningless as awareness weeks can be, I can't help but think that there might be a way to encourage people to tread carefully. Don't assume couples are childless by choice. Don't assume they want to share every detail of what they're experiencing. And don't ever put your hand on a woman's stomach and cheerfully say, "Maybe you'll be next!"

Somehow Father Tom knew just what to say to offer real comfort and support. These past few

weeks he has been on my mind, as he is every Easter. It was around Easter of 2008 when we realized he was nearing the end of his time on earth, and it was that May 28 when he passed away.

We never spoke with him about adoption, but we began our journey that summer – and I don't believe that was a coincidence. As we were completing paperwork and wondering who our child would be, I often thought of Father Tom. John and I have said many times how much Father would have loved meeting Leo – and now Daniel. I can't help but think that he had a hand in helping us bring these children into our home, into our family, into our lives.



He was always certain that God would bless us with a child. And God has – twice over – with boys who fill our hearts with a joy I never imagined when I visited a Franciscan retreat center nine years ago.

And that's a topic we are always happy to discuss.

*Joining Theology Is a Verb and Reconciled to You for Worth Revisiting Wednesday on April 21, 2015.*