

Wit & Wisdom: I feel the earth move

By Father Joseph Breighner

So where were you when the Aug. 23 earthquake hit? I was hearing confessions at Oak Crest in a room off the chapel. The whole room and chapel shook. After that, no one else came to confession! I guess people figured: "Don't go in there! What kind of penance is Father Joe handing out?"

Mass followed next at 2 p.m. Since most folks were in a state of anxiety and concern, I resorted to the only calming thing I could think of - humor. Humor, that is, in the form of puns.

The opening hymn at Mass was: "This Day God Gives Me." One of the lines in the first stanza is that God gives us "firmness of earth." So my first words at Mass were: "God didn't deliver on that promise!" Then I suggested that the opening hymn might rather have been: "I felt the earth move under my feet."

My first words at homily time were: "Well, we all came into the chapel as Roman Catholics. But I think today we're all really Quakers!"

At the end of Mass I added: "Well, I think we can all agree that today's liturgy was a very moving experience."

After Mass one lady stopped me and asked: "How did you do that? How did you keep coming up with one line after another?" I replied: "I have a very strange mind. Had I used it for scientific purposes I might have discovered the cure for cancer! Instead I use it to PUN-ish people!"

Even in the "old days," in minor seminary, puns were recognized as a unique form of humor. One classic story was told of one priest on the faculty who told so many puns that one day his fellow priests locked him in a closet and said: "We're not letting you out until you come up with a really good pun." There was a pause, and, then, from inside the closet came his voice: "O pun the door!" They released him.

My purpose in writing all this is not really just to rehash puns, but to reflect on the wisdom of retirement communities. Had all those people been alone in individual homes, the experience might have been far more frightening. But here in the chapel, and later in hallways, dining rooms and gathering places, they could ease each other's anxieties.

Then, as we all remember, a few days after the earthquake a hurricane followed. As one resident put it: "It felt so good being here, and not being in my house, having to worry about the roof blowing off, the cellar flooding and other complications of the weather."

While there are lovely grounds to walk around, most residents never have to go outside for anything. Most of their medical, pharmacy and food needs are all available within the complex.

Oak Crest is not just for the rich. My sister and brother-in-law hardly fall into that category. Yet, through the sale of their house they were able to afford the "down payment," and through Social Security and retirement they can pay their monthly "rent."

I'm not a salesman for Oak Crest. There are many fine retirement communities. I would invite you to investigate them all. But I do spend part of every Tuesday at Oak Crest for confession, Mass and, usually, supper. I'm impressed with how people look out for each other and care for each other.

No, nothing's perfect. No family is perfect. No institution is perfect.

And, yes, there is a grieving process involved in moving from one's home to a large institution.

A retirement community may not be for everyone. But it is comforting to know that the choice is there. And that the choice is good.