

October
In the Heartland

Gratitude

By Bishop Richard Pates
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On Nov. 20, 1968, I was joined by 62 other seminarian classmates from the United States at the North American College on a walk through special gates. They were open only on rare occasions. This was one. We were on our way to St. Peter's Basilica for ordination to priesthood by Bishop Francis Reh, rector of the college.

It was an extraordinarily memorable moment for me as it culminated 12 years of preparation for priesthood. I remember Bishop Reh laying his hands on my head, realizing that with his instrumentality and through the power of the Holy Spirit, I was fully identified with Christ the priest. It was truly the fulfillment of a long anticipated joy.

The excitement of the day was heightened by the presence of my parents and family whom I had not been with during the 3 ½ years in Rome. My folks had been highly supportive of my vocation and so, they too, regaled in the identity conferred on me.

My first assignment as priest was to the Blessed Sacrament Parish on the east side of St. Paul, Minnesota. The pastor, Monsignor Frank Curtin, was an extraordinarily kind and outgoing individual who, unfortunately, was suffering from a painful case of cancer. He determined that he would take the funerals since there were no brides' mothers to contend with. In turn, I would do the weddings. Given the demographics of the parish, that meant I eventually witnessed 45 marriages that first year with this community.

The experience of an intense lifestyle validated the call I had received. The time spent was exciting, touched the full gamut of life stages of those I ministered to and brought great satisfaction. All began well.

Some 49 years later, I still have the appetite for service as priest. The experience has greatly varied but the one constant is putting people in touch with God so that their lives might reach the fullness of meaning and develop into a close relationship with Jesus. My life is enjoyable and filled with challenging times. I often say that if I were to live a thousand lives, I would live each as a priest.

Thus, my heart is filled with gratitude for the blessings that have been mine. I can testify to the happiness that has accommodated challenges and bumpy roads along the way.

In my great, good fortune, I have been able to spend the last 10 years surrounded by hearty Iowans as bishop. I knew very few members in this community when I first came. After I made the rounds of the 23 counties, I knew I was blessed once again.

It has been most rewarding to align with dedicated priests, zealous and spirited permanent deacons, well-grounded religious women and an ever-willing staff at the Catholic Pastoral Center. Moreover, the lay leadership within the community has guided us with well-trained competency that knows no bounds. Derived from their secular skills and bottomless generosity, they have demonstrated what it means to be Church, truly involved at every level.

It is our ongoing call to introduce one another and others to a relationship with Jesus, the Lord, who has the words of life. Contact with him gives way to deeper bonding with this God which is most fulfilling and holds the keys to ultimate happiness. God provides the ligaments bonding together the gifts each of us has. And so, from God's gifts we become One Body, One Body of Christ. We are Christ's Body in the world today.

In sum total, my 50 years as priest and 10 as Bishop of Des Moines have been incomparable. The blessed years have been totally unearned on my part but greatly cherished. No wonder my heart is full of gratitude.