

Fourth Sunday in Easter

Forty years ago this very day [at this very hour] in this very place, Bishop John Sullivan ordained me a priest. I wanted to become a priest of this diocese early in my life, probably around my first communion. I was helping my mother straighten up my parents' bedroom when, talking about church, she remarked that priests and nuns started out just like everybody else. I said, "You mean I could become a priest?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Well, that's what I'm going to do." My family and friends tell me I never wavered from that conviction, and I continually felt their support. I admired the priests in St. Therese Parish and the ones in my extended family. Incredibly, if you trace back four generations in my family, you'll find 17 priests and nuns. My grandmother's brother, Father Joe Neudecker, came to this cathedral for my ordination and vested me for the first time. He put this vestment over my head, a chasuble that my mother made.

My years in the seminary had all been satisfying. I then spent a few years back in school shortly after ordination, as I joked with Bishop Sullivan, "to try to get it right this time." My seminary rector once asked about my vision for how I would spend a priest's typical day. I naively said, "Well, I wouldn't sit behind a desk. I'd be out there with the people."

As a priest I've served urban parishes with schools like St. Elizabeth, Nativity and St. Regis; rural parishes like those in Maysville and Cameron, where I also did prison ministry; the multiethnic community of St. Anthony; diocesan offices such as the Center for Pastoral Life and Ministry, Priestly Life and Ministry, the Ecumenical and Interreligious Office, and the Office of Divine Worship; and now I serve the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Even though I am often "out there with the people," I admit that I now selfishly enjoy the rare days when I can just sit behind a desk.

Forty-one years ago when I was ordained a deacon, I walked up the aisle of this cathedral feeling excited, but forty years ago I walked up this aisle feeling serious. I sensed that the future would not all be fun and games. I was right, but I can honestly tell you this: Every day of those 40 years I have been happy; I have felt grateful for opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others. Some people ask, "Isn't priesthood a lonely life?" There are lonely priests, but thankfully I have never felt that. I have enjoyed friendships and time to pursue my interests in music, sports and research.

Looking back on it in light of today's gospel, it feels as though the words Jesus spoke to his disciples long ago, he speaks to me today: "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." That's all I've tried to do. I listen for the voice of Christ and follow him because I believe he knows me.

Often you are for me the voice of Christ. I try to listen to you so that I learn where the shepherd is leading me. Sometimes I don't do it very well, but I am grateful to each of you who speak the gospel to me and show me its joys.

I pray that you may have the same experience. Christ is your shepherd. He is calling you. When you follow him with your whole life, no one can take you out of the Father's hand. Some things will not go your way, but they will go God's way. If you can live with that, you too will be happy every day.

Sunday, May 12, 2019