

A priest has many blessings and challenges

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One of the interesting things about being a priest is that you rarely know what challenges, demands, opportunities or responsibilities any particular day may bring. Nor is the priest aware of what joys or sorrows he will share with those to whom he ministers. The appointment book may indicate one thing, but reality may be quite different. The rectory phone rings with urgent news concerning one of his parishioners, and everything changes. A priest goes where God wants him to be. This is also true in the life of the diocesan bishop or, in my case, the diocesan administrator.

A recent period can give you an idea of some of the joys and sorrows that God sends my way. Recently I conducted the funeral of a wonderful Catholic gentleman, James Martine Jr. He was truly "Catholic" in every way. He loved the Church, loved the sacraments, loved his family and friends and did much good during his lifetime.

His gentle, yet firm, personality was a gift he was able to give to his children, and I even noticed those qualities in his grandchildren. God gave James two wonderful wives: Regina, whom he cared for during a long illness that preceded her death; and Rita, who lovingly cared for him through years of frail health. I was blessed to marry Jim and Rita, blessed to travel to Israel and Rome with them and blessed to accompany this gentleman whom I had known for over 40 years to his place of rest.

There were 50 pilgrims on that trip to Israel that Jim, Rita and I took, and one of them was Verna Eckert. Verna died a few days after Jim. I conducted the vigil service for her. It was not difficult to find the right words to say.

She was truly filled with the Holy Spirit, loved the Church, the sacraments, the Blessed Mother, the rosary; she was a dedicated minister to the sick and helped her loving husband Ken organize the senior citizens of her parish. She was/is alive in Jesus Christ. When either Jim or Verna spoke of Godly things, their eyes became intense and their excitement obvious.

My heart was truly lifted up as I spent time with our seminarians during their recent annual retreat. You have no idea what a great group of young men we have preparing to become priests. They are dedicated, intelligent, very kind, joyous, manly, and love our Lord deeply. I celebrated Mass for them in a cabin next to Lake Hamilton. A number of our priests traveled

there to share their priestly journeys with these young men whom they will one day call their brother priests.

At the end of their retreat, the seminarians and their families gathered at the Cathedral of St. Andrew for Mass and a luncheon generously prepared by the Serra Club.

The nuns at Holy Angels Convent in Jonesboro invited me to witness the profession of vows of two novices as they became nuns. God is obviously caring for the needs of the Holy Angels Convent in the vocations he gave to Sister Mary Clare and Sister Mary Beth.

Sister Mary Clare is a nurse from Texas who speaks Spanish; what a gift! She will work with the Hispanic population in northeast Arkansas. Sister Mary Beth had been a business woman in Rhode Island and will be able to put those skills to work at Holy Angels. Family from Rhode Island, Texas and Illinois gathered to witness these two extraordinarily gifted women give their lives in service to Jesus Christ as Olivetan Benedictine nuns.

When I walked into the hotel in North Little Rock for the Mass that would conclude the Charismatic Conference, it was clear that the Holy Spirit was working overtime. Arms and voices were raised in prayer and song. Some were slain in the Spirit; some danced; some were healed; some cried; some spoke in tongues; all prayed.

I spoke to them of the gift of awareness, which marks someone who is truly filled with the life of God. If one has been given the gift of awareness, he recognizes the beauty of the love that God has for him and the spiritual treasures which surround him.

It's always uplifting to speak to a group who possesses the gift of awareness. Their eyes are alert and their spiritual hunger eager to be satisfied.

A priest experiences so many things in the life of the Church: death, grief, love, joy, hope, hunger, commitment, providence, family life, excitement, and awareness. It is fulfilling ... and challenging.