

The Ascension of the Lord 40th Anniversary of Ordination

Cycle B

May 20, 2012 12 noon

Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air

Shaping Influences

There is a rather flip definition of a good homily.

Probably most of us priests and deacons have heard this. This definition says that a good homily is one that has a brief introduction and a brief conclusion, with the shortest possible distance between those two points.

Today, I just might violate that definition a bit! As I thought about these forty years as a priest, I found myself reflecting on influences.

What are the influences that have more or less shaped the kind of priest I am today? No question, I could go back to my mother and father.

They certainly had a wonderful influence on me and my brother Charlie and I remain very grateful to them. But, for today, I want to look just at the past forty years in the priesthood.

What or who in my ministry has been most influential in shaping me as a priest? As many of you would guess, yes, I am going to cite three shaping influences.

1. The Wall Gang at IHM Parish

The first comes from my first assignment at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in the Towson area of Baltimore County.

My role at Immaculate Heart of Mary was to work with the youth, mainly the teenagers. I quickly became aware of a group of teenagers, boys and girls, who would just hang out in the evenings on the street along the parish property.

They were referred to as “The Wall Gang” because they gathered near a three-foot-high retaining wall that the parish had along the sidewalk. I quickly learned that these young people were responsible for about \$500 worth of damage a month to the parish buildings.

And that was a lot of damage forty years ago. “The Wall Gang” was also doing a lot of damage to the shopping center across the street.

So the question was: what do we do? These kids were not affiliating with our regular parish youth group or with anything in the parish, even though we knew a lot of them were Catholic.

Well, to make a long story short, I started to hang out with them – I even let my hair grow a bit longer! You can imagine, I felt pretty uncomfortable at first.

But, what rather quickly happened is that three couples in the parish joined me in this ministry. Before long, we opened a drop-in center that operated three nights a week and we had over 100 teenagers registered in it.

That tells you the number of kids like this that we were dealing with! We got to know them, they got to know us, we got them in good activities and some good things happened.

What I learned is that these were really good kids. I got to know them no longer as “The Wall Gang” with all the negative connotations of that label, but I got to know them as Stanley, Brian, Barbara, Tracy, Michael, Glenn, and on it went.

This became a defining influence for me. It taught me not to label people – definitely not to label them as bad or just write them off.

Instead, it taught me to get to know people as persons, each with a unique story and each with good potentials. It taught me to take people as they are and humbly walk with them – and this is so important – that we humbly walk with others in their journey.

This experience left me with the clear conviction that this is the best way to be a priestly minister and the best way for God to emerge in others. This is the first influence that remains with me to this day.

2. Archbishop Borders

The second shaping influence is Archbishop Borders.

Archbishop Borders was the Archbishop of Baltimore from 1974 to 1989. In 1978, he asked me to leave Saint Joseph Parish in Fullerton and come to work with him.

In that role, I was the Archbishop’s assistant and was almost always at his side. I got to know him very well and he had many wonderful qualities.

One of his themes became almost a trademark. It was: “*Unity in Diversity.*”

The Archbishop was open to discussion, disagreement, and diversity. He would listen to different ideas and participate in debate, and then consider all the ideas he heard as he made decisions.

He firmly believed that we as a Church could be one and have unity with diversity – unity with and in diversity. I think he had really internalized a saying of Pope John XXIII.

John XXIII, the Pope who convened the Second Vatican Council, said: “*In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things, charity.*” Archbishop Borders lived those words and one result was a wonderfully inclusive approach in his ministry.

The Archbishop's leadership demonstrated that we are at our best when we are inviting, welcoming, and inclusive. This approach enables young people like "The Wall Gang" who are searching, or adults who thoughtfully disagree or persons who are struggling with faith itself to continue the journey of life with God and yes, with the Church.

So this inclusiveness has been a shaping influence in my ministry. I am convinced that this inclusiveness it puts us at our best in being Catholic

3. Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Margaret

The third shaping influence that I want to mention consists of the two parishes where I have been pastor – Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Margaret.

In a way, this influence is simple, but it is very important. And it is this: respect and trust on my part are crucial.

If I as a priest respect you as persons, if I respect your giftedness and talent and competence, if I humbly respect you as my brothers and sisters on this human journey and this journey of faith, if I do this, great things happen. God's work takes off.

Community and parish and faith will flourish. I am so convinced that this is the way for our Church to be fully alive today.

I experienced this at Saint Francis de Sales for eight years. I have also experienced this here at Saint Margaret's over these past six years.

And I want to add this. If I as priest bring this respect and trust to you, God's people, then I receive it in return in abundance.

This is how we are to be Church together – women and men, lay, religious and clergy, youth and middle-aged and senior, everyone of sincere faith. It is exciting for me to be a priest and for us to be Church in this way.

Conclusion

Well, there are some other influences I could mention, but I will stop here.

I recall a story of a little boy who went up to the pastor as he was leaving church one Sunday. He said to the pastor, *"When I grow up, I'm going to give you some money."*

The pastor responded, *"Well, thank you, but why do you want to do that?"* And the little boy said, *"Because my daddy says that you're one of the poorest preachers we've ever had."*

So, I'll stop here or I may run into that little boy later on! I thank all of you for gathering with me for this celebration of Eucharist today; you and your presence mean great deal to me.