

A LETTER FROM ME TO YOU

Dallas, Texas
Catholic Health Association of the United States
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INTRODUCTION

This letter has three parts. The first one dates from the 1960s, shortly after I was ordained a priest. The second, is from the late 80s, and the third from today and tomorrow. Each of these parts reflects on a particular dimension of my life and ministry as a priest.

I. THE 1960s

I was ordained a priest in 1961, shortly after St. John XXIII had announced that an ecumenical council would be held. Indeed, it took place from 1962-1965. This meant that my early years as a priest were marked by openness and change.

A choice had to be made, and I made it joyfully: either remain in the past and reject all the coming changes; or, try to espouse what was being proposed and see how I could further its thrust.

I thought that after ordination I was going to be a “heroic” missionary either in Africa or in Latin America. Instead, my superior called me in one day and told me that I had been registered for studies in canon law. I had never dreamed of such a possibility, but gladly embarked on my program of studies, and began them while the council was still going on. In other words, from my earliest days, I approached canon law with the idea that it was something that was evolving.

The key lesson we were taking from the conciliar debates at that time was that, in following Christ, the dignity of the human person was primordial.

Everything seemed to be quite rosy until 1968. During that year, St. Paul VI issued his encyclical *Humanae vitae* which, unfortunately, led to serious dissent. People began overtly to criticize the pope and to withdraw in large numbers from the church community.

It was a difficult time for every priest -- no matter what were his personal convictions at the time. Personally, I had only one choice and it has remained with me throughout all

my life as a priest: I had to be with the pope. I would never say or write a word against the teachings of this encyclical, even if it was sometimes difficult to apply then when people came to speak about issues.

However, as is often the case, the encyclical opened a whole new unexpected world: the recognition of the role that personal conscience plays in forming a moral decision. The importance of recognizing the need for an informed conscience became primordial in the faith community. It too built on the recognition of the dignity of each human person. As new issues would most likely arise in the coming years, this would provide a solid base upon which to evaluate situations.

With the freedom that this chosen attitude gave me, priestly ministry was joyful for me. I was named to the formation team at the seminary and did my best to try and impart this attitude of freedom, both in direction and in class. In other words, we have to remain optimistic, no matter what happens; we keep an open mind; and we try always to be with the Church. As Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, who else could we go to? You have the words of everlasting life" (John 6:68).

II. THE LATE 80s

I've now been ordained for some 25 years, and things take on new light.

In 1983, St. John Paul II promulgated the new Code of Canon Law. For canonists, this was a new day. Again, we had to make the same choice as with the renewal brought about by the council: embark totally on the journey, or resist. I, as you can imagine, decided to embrace the new code fully and tried to find out how best to make use of its insights in building up the church community.

Shortly after the code was promulgated, I finished my term as Dean of the Faculty of Canon Law at Saint Paul University, and I was given a sabbatical year. With the encouragement of my superiors -- again, their intervention was decisive -- I took most of a year to look at myself as a priest. I learned quite a lesson from the very beginning of this process. When applying to enter the program, I was asked to describe myself. In response, I spelled out the different positions I had held in the church. However, I was quickly informed that this was not an answer to the question: they hadn't asked what I had done in ministry, but, rather, who I was. They told me that if I identified myself with my work, and then the work disappeared, I'll have little remaining to serve as a foundation.

That year prepared me well for a new form of canonical ministry: the sexual abuse scandal was just beginning to reach the light of day, and many people were looking for guidance. Many priests felt that their entire life had fallen into a void -- because they

identified themselves with what they were doing, not with who they were! Their ministry was questioned, the bishops seemed to be caught on every side -- no matter what they did, it was wrong! As one bishop told me at the time: "It's not the cruise I signed up for..."

The church was totally unprepared to address this situation. We all made mistakes in trying to assist, but, with time, positions seemed to become clearer. At that time, I had no idea that the situation would take on the proportions it was to assume in later years.

Also, this was a moment when the church had to face a form of "death and dying". Current structures no longer responded to needs; parishes had to be closed. Religious institutes realized that their ministry was nearing completion.

Again, we could have looked at this from a negative perspective. But, which new doors did it open? The most obvious one was the fact that lay persons could -- and should -- assume a significant and rightful place in the church's ministry, especially in areas of governance related to health care, education, and social services. These new buds led to the establishment of the "PJPs", and I was fortunate to have been available to become involved in this process.

III. The 2000s

Now, as I look back on nearly 60 years of priestly ministry, one thing stands out. My ministry was focussed on the desire to be service to others, more particularly in the area of my work as a canonist.

I have learned over the years that it is of little avail to tell people: "You cannot do this or that. It is against Canon Law!!!" There are, of course, times when what is being proposed does not have a solid doctrinal base and cannot be accepted.

However, a canonist's role consists, then, in trying to open some windows, and find other possibilities -- in the line of what people were looking for, but within the parameters of church teaching.

This is a challenge because it is becoming more and more evident that the Code of Canon Law was not written for the situations we are facing today. I'll probably not be around to see a "new" code promulgated since such things take a lot of time; but if, in the meantime, we can gather together the experiences -- good and less good -- of the past twenty or so years, we can provide material for those who will be in charge of this process of revision.

It has been wonderful to have been able to be directly involved with the life of the church over these past sixty years. There have been roller coaster rides, but every slump leads to a new high, provided we can seize the moment and put it to our advantage.

CONCLUSION

So, at the end of this letter, my message would be: Do not be afraid. There is a tomorrow, although we have no idea what it will hold. Let all of us do our utmost to be involved in shaping this tomorrow -- which will soon be here. Protecting the dignity of the human person at all stages of life must be a hallmark of our ministry, for it is in this that we "find the words of eternal life" as Christ taught us.

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