

A Walking Question Mark

Almost forty years ago, while training in the use of television and media, the well-known TV presenter said, “When I see a priest walking down the street, I see a walking question mark.”

Recently, I thought about that comment when I read a column by Eugene Kennedy in the “National Catholic Reporter,” titled “The secret lives of our noble priests.” His column began with, “After a decade of revelations about sexual and financial scandals among priests, you would think that there is nothing more to learn about these men who were once revered in the Catholic culture and respected in the culture at large. While it is undeniable that we know more than we care about the once hidden lives of some priests, there is a far larger and deeper territory that might as well be the cave next to Bin Laden’s – even though it can be entered at any time in the rectory just down the street.”

Kennedy goes on to wonder about the “largely unexplored setting of the secret lives of the good priests all around us.” He goes on to say that “goodness never gets into the newspapers. Check the headlines on any day’s paper for the common denominator of a negative word – fraud, investigation, death, fire, failure – and we understand why priests who have kept their promises and stayed at their posts are literally too good for words.”

In June 2010, we ended the “Year of the Priest,” a year dedicated to reflecting on and supporting the priesthood. One travel agency ran a contest among priests to write an essay “describing the most beautiful and impressive experience of their priestly ministry, showing how God has worked in the lives of the faithful by means of his priests as instruments.” Yours truly wrote of several such experiences which, of course, didn’t win the coveted prize. The contributions are supposed to be collected together and published in a book.

In a recent interview in The New York Times, Archbishop Dolan, commented on how “it is very difficult to get through to some parishes or reach some priests. To get a cheerful, helpful, welcoming live voice is rare.” Maybe, there is a deeper reason rather than the usual “office hours” answer. He goes on to share some advice he received as a newly ordained priest from a seasoned pastor. “The true mark of a priestly gentleman is how he treats his predecessor and his successor; two, for the first year in a parish, the only thing you should change is your socks.”

The publicity about the clerical sex abuse and financial scandals continues to take its toll on priests, especially the good ones. So often, such scandals paint all priests as guilty by default. The same brush paints an all encompassing path. The good priests labor under that cloud of suspicion and presumed guilt.

By default, most priests become independent thinkers. The nature of the calling propels them into decision making that is sometimes thrust upon them by a laity that is unwilling to make the decision or assume the consequential responsibility. Such independence can often lead to a certain isolationism where one is alone with one’s own thoughts, feelings, decisions, without opportunities to bounce them off anyone. Most of a priest’s time is spent listening, but who listens to him in the quiet moments of his soul-searching?

There is a certain sadness and guilt among priests when a fellow priest decides to leave the ministry. The pangs of guilt fills them with second-guessing. They try to decipher the reasons for the leaving. Was it disillusionment? Lack of support? Unrealistic expectations? Doubts? Negative environment? Loneliness?

Good priests find themselves in a quandary. On the one hand, they are fed up with having to apologize for the church and trying to explain some of its antics on peripheral things. On the other hand, they would rather wear out than rust out as they love their vocation, their people, and the trust people place in them at the most joyful and vulnerable times in their lives.

Please don’t call me at 3 a.m., tomorrow morning. There will be a mysterious question mark riding his bike down along the beach in Bay St. Louis.