

Nothing deader than...

When friends move away or we move away from friends, there is always the promise to stay in touch. Staying in touch is easy for the first while because it provides opportunities to share new experiences and new discoveries. We all want the move to go well and we want to support the movers to let them know that we value their friendship and that staying in touch with them is important to all of us.

After a period of staying in touch, inevitably, the “out of sight, out of mind” mentality creeps in and we keep in touch less and less. Eventually, it goes from keeping in touch on a regular basis to keeping in touch with a Christmas card and then, the keeping in touch mentality dies a slow death.

As priests, we make the same promise to keep in touch with friends we make in parishes we have served over the years. Invariably, as we move from parish to parish, we make less and less friends because, in the back of our minds, we know that we are just going to be around in that parish for a season and then move off to some other parish. Knowing that, we create less rooted relationships.

As one who has served in five parishes so far in my priesthood, I continue to reflect on the “keeping in touch” promises we make with special people in each particular parish. On the one hand, as we leave one parish and begin in another, we try to concentrate and focus our efforts on the new parish rather than hanker for the parish we just left.

Transitions are always difficult both for priests and people. One of the hardest things for a newly assigned priest is to hear the people say, “Fr. X did it this way.” Obviously, the old saying seems to apply: “A new brooms sweeps clean but the old one is good for the corners.” In other words, the priest who just left fit better because the people were used to the way he did things.

I found five ways that the idea of “keeping in touch” wanes over the years for priests. Firstly, a priest is transferred to another parish. He meets a parishioner from his former parish and the parishioner asks, “How do you like St..X, your new parish?” The priest is happy that someone knows where he is now assigned.

Secondly, some years later, the priest meets the same parishioner and asks, “Are you still at St. X?” The priest is delighted that the parishioner remembers his present assignment.

Thirdly, several years later, the priest meets the same parishioner again who asks, “Where are you now?” The priest informs the parishioner that he is the same parish to the bewilderment of the parishioner.

Fourthly, the same parishioner meets the same priest many more years later and asks, “Who are you?” or “Do I know you from somewhere?” Amnesia has finally arrived.

Lastly, a priest dies and his funeral is about to take place. The same parishioner says to his or her present pastor, “I thought that priest died a long time ago.”

I wonder is there the same parallel between the stages of forgetting “keeping in touch” for a priest and the friends who move away. The journey and promise of “keeping in touch” is fraught with possibilities and forgetfulness, leading to eventual death.

Some priests often remark that “there is nothing deader than a dead priest.” Maybe there is nothing deader than a relationship or a promise to “keep in touch” that has endured several small deaths until the final death knell.

Maybe, we need to remember that no matter how many promises we make about “keeping in touch” with friends, inevitably, such promises die and other relationships are reborn that take their place. It seems to be a fact that life is filled with dyings and risings; beginnings and endings until we experience the final dying in order to be able to rise to a new life where there is no need for any further need for “keeping in touch” because we will be in touch with the One that really matters.