

No one shouted “Stop!”

Back in 1968, I read a series of articles in a national Irish newspaper that impacted me greatly. The series chronicled the life and times of the journalist's home town. It was titled “No One Shouted Stop (The Death of an Irish Town),” I found it very depressing reading as he reflected on how the town he loved and grew up in was slowly dying and no one seemed to care. The series, although depressing reading initially, was offering a challenge to anyone who cared about the town or its future to stand up and shout “Stop,” that the people cannot allow this to happen to their town.

On Sunday, I drove through that same town; not really drove through it, but bypassed it. The highway allowed me to bypass it on my way home. Of course, there were signs on the highway for the town if one cared to enter it. I didn't.

I often wonder why that series of articles about that particular town stayed with me for almost fifty years. Somehow, I may be getting close to the reason now.

Now, retired in my own community, I continue to look lovingly and critically at the community I was born into, grew up in, left for forty years and now return to live there again. Somehow, I sense a new challenge and direction in my life.

My community has not had a resident priest in over ten years. Its faith community has been serviced by a visiting priest on weekends. Now, one of their own, yours truly, has come home to live among them and minister with them. I sense a ray of hope from the people, a sense of consistency, an expectation thrust upon the shoulders of one of their own again.

During previous summer vacations, I sensed a desperation, a negativity, a resignation, an apathy that crept into the community. I wondered if anyone cared, if anyone was willing to stand up and shout “stop.” The news seemed negative and defeatist. School enrollment plummeted; community pride was almost non-existent; emigration to Canada and Australia took away the young, future lifeblood.

My thoughts took me back to the days following Hurricane Katrina when I received a phone call in Ireland from a good friend in Bay St. Louis. Her question not only haunted me but became the catalyst for personal growth and challenge in the years ahead. She simply asked, “Now that you have seen what has happened to us in Katrina, do you still want to come back to us?” My obvious answer, without hesitation, was, “of course!”

I often wondered why I decided to build a retirement home in my home village. I wondered why I felt compelled to seek early retirement and return to my roots. Was I just tired of the demands of administering a parish? Was I disillusioned with the official church? Was I just ready to retire, both emotionally and physically?

Somehow, I was not ready to hang up my clerical boots, read lots of books, pen an occasional column for Gulf Pine Catholic, try my hand at some gardening and farming, or become a recluse in my own house. Something kept gnawing at my soul and spirit, reminding me that, somehow unknown to me, yet, by design, the Lord had a retirement plan in mind which didn't mean retirement but a totally new and adventuresome journey into another exciting journey.

Somehow, deep down, I knew that the series of articles almost fifty years earlier, now visited my doorstep. The name of the town may be different; the decades much later; the challenges just as hectic; the need for renewed strength, hope just as demanding. My community was dying and I was being called to say, “Stop.”