

Walking into eternity

During recent vacations, I went to see some family friends at a local nursing home. It was then that I noticed him. Dressed in black, he was constantly on the move. He moved up and down the corridors, even into and out of closets. His head was bowed and his pace quick. He was in his own world, all because of Alzimers disease.

Who was this man? Yes, I had known him all my life. At a young kid, I had served Mass for him when he came home on vacations. I was captivated by his strong, gravelly voice as well as strong will and determined personality. In later years, while on vacation, I rode with him out into the Atlantic visiting some nearby islands.

He had served as a priest in various parishes in my home diocese until he had to retire because of the beginning stages of Alzimers which was to closet his mental world while his physical world continued to survive. Following ten years of walking the corridors in the nursing home, he stopped walking and made his final journey.

I attended the funerals of several priests I knew and ministered with during my priesthood. There was a special connection with such deceased priests, having ministered with them and been inspired by them. This one was to be different.

I watched the constant stream of cars coming to this priest's wake. The lines were constant and long as people waited to sympathize with his family. The family sat in the local Community Center during the five hour wake service accepting the support, prayers and sympathy of the people who came. They must have felt a great pride to know that their brother had impacted so many people during his priestly life. I, too, joined the long line in the chilly weather to meet the family. I had known most of them growing up as neighbors. Some were older, I went to elementary school with others.

The next afternoon, about thirty of the diocesan priests gathered for the funeral. I joined them as they vested for Mass. On entering the room, I only recognized one priest. Now retired, he had been my pastor when I was ordained in the same church forty years earlier. As we chatted, I noticed other priests looking my way. Automatically, I could hear them asking each other, as they nodded in my direction: "Who is that strange priest?" Obviously, I was not one of their own.

Some priests came and introduced themselves to which I responded, "Michael Tracey, Mississippi." There was no point in suggesting "Biloxi" because they probably never heard of it.

Moments later, a short, slender gentleman with graying hair, entered the room. Fellow priests began to shake his hand and simply say, "Michael." I recognized him as the archbishop and was surprised that they called him by his first name. This surprised me even more because I had heard that he could be rather stubborn and inflexible and that his relationship with his priests was rather strained.

Following the funeral Mass, I joined the family for a beautiful meal at a hotel. On the way into the meal, I chatted with the archbishop who surprised me by knowing more about me than I realized, especially that I was a writer. We chatted about the status of vocations in his diocese and noted that both of us had something in common. Both of our fathers knew each other and worked together decades earlier. I could see him wondering: how can I use this priest in my diocese? Obviously, not being a priest of the diocese provided me with some trump cards to play close to my heart in case I would receive a phone call and an offer later.

My thoughts brought me back to the archbishop's homily when he said "We place great store on memory, on people we have met, on places we have visited, on games we have seen, books we have read or films we have enjoyed. We depend on memory so much for communication. Yet the Carter family continued to visit when there was no reaction, with no communication, no words from Seamus. They journeyed that long lonely road patiently and with great understanding as they continued to visit."

As his four remaining brothers carried his casket into the cemetery, I recalled my own special memories of the times I served Mass for him. I remembered our boat trips. I remembered his gravelly voice and I remembered the priest who walked the corridors of the nursing home for ten years. Now, he didn't have to walk any more as he was being carried lovingly by his brothers into eternity.