

Are you available?

I receive emails and notes, commenting on my "Across the Pond" columns on a regular basis. It is nice to know that people who read my columns can connect with them and, in some way, taps into their own story or something from their own experience.

Recently, I received a long email from a reader in the diocese. She asked not to mention her real name and hoped that I might comment on her experience.

She wrote the following: "Dear Father Tracy. I want to share with you my experience hoping that you can write something about that in your column, or address the issue to our Diocese.

On last Holy Week I was having some problems with my husband, lack of communications, and other issues, one day I felt really depressed so I needed to talk to my Priest, I went to church after 8:00 mass and asked him if He got some time. He told me, He had a doctor's appointment. I left my house leaving a note to my husband that did not worry about me, that I will be Ok and I did not know when I was going or coming back. I went to see an elder friend knowing that helping him would help me to find my inner peace. While visiting my friend I went to mass and asked the Priest in there if I could talk to him after mass, also He was in a hurry, ready for another mass in Biloxi. I was really sad and felt like nobody wanted to help me. For my good save, I was born catholic and been like that all my life, my faith is strong and I am working to be better every day. So after mass I talked to God and came home with a tender and comprehensive heart, apologize to my husband for leaving him those days and try to clear off the misunderstandings.

I know that we are having a crisis in our Catholic Church, that we do not have enough Priests to take care of the people. My wonder is : What happen with the lost sheep and the Shepherd?? If I was the lost sheep in that moment, the shepherd, my Priest was too busy that did not have time for me? What will be if this sheep was about to commit suicide?? Of something like that?? Thanks God this was not the case. What about other people that have more serious issues than me?? . If my faith will not be strong maybe I will go to another Church?? And I will be converted to a different religion? Our Priests are so busy taking care of many things with not enough help, that they did not have time for the lost sheep.

I pray for all you who took the difficult and scarified challenge of serving to the Lord . Thank you for your comments,"

After reading the email, I thought about William Butler Yeats' poem, "The Ballad of Peter Gilligan" where he says, "The old priest, Peter Gilligan, was weary night and day; for half his flock were in their beds, or under green sods lay. Once, while he nodded on a chair, at the moth-hour of eve, another poor man sent for him, and he began to grieve I have no rest, nor joy, nor peace, for people die and die"; and after cried he, "God forgive! my body spake, not I!"

As one who has served as a priest in Mississippi and now ministers in my own parish in Ireland, that hadn't had a priest in ten years, I have an interesting perspective from both vantage points. I know about, read about the shortage of priests in the States and I now see first-hand the dire shortage of priests in Ireland where clustering and circuit riding of priests is as common as Mississippi's summer humidity. No longer can it be business as usual. No longer do we have super-human priests, but flawed human beings like anyone else. Expectations are high. Morale can be low. Workload can be overwhelming. Loneliness can be haunting as priests, like Peter Gilligan, spend themselves in service of God and neighbor. Maybe, as priests, we need to hurry more to a doctor to make sure we still have something to offer to our harried flock.

Perhaps, the last stanza of "The Ballad of Peter Gilligan," echoes kernels of truth when it says: "He who is wrapped in purple robes, with planets in His care, had pity on the least of things, asleep upon a chair."