

Are you surprised?

It is easy for children to be surprised but, with adults, it is a different story. Children are filled with anticipation and wonder. To them, everything is new and is exciting and is worth exploring. Adults are less curious, less inclined to be surprised, more in control and more predictable.

The difference in approaches became more apparent to me as my family prepared to celebrate my golden anniversary as a priest.

As we began to plan for a celebration, my godchild and niece, Malia, asked me “What would you like us to plan for your 50th?” My request was very simple, “I would like for us to have a family Mass that includes the family members whose weddings I performed as well as those of my nieces and nephews. We could have a family meal at a restaurant afterwards.”

Then, she asked, “What can we get you as a present for your 50th?” My answer was simple, “I have everything I need. I don’t need anything.” Satisfied with my ground rules, Malia began the process of organizing events.

I discovered that the local community that I grew up and now lived in as retired, wanted to honour me with a simple celebration. The simple celebration followed with an opportunity sit down with neighbours and reflect while sharing cups of tea and some good home baked goodies. It was ironic that the celebration took place in the same room that, fifty years earlier, I vested as a deacon to journey to the church nearby for ordination and returned to that same room hours later as a priest.

The family celebration followed a few days later. One afternoon, I walked into my brother’s home for a visit and got my first surprise. Sitting in the corner, I noticed a woman with long, red hair and a freckled face. I recognised her immediately. She surprised me by flying in from Orlando for my celebration. Her father had organized my silver jubilee in Hattiesburg years earlier. Everyone else knew about her plans except me. My niece asked, “Are you surprised?”

Later that evening, while I was sitting down relaxing, my younger sister and her husband arrived as part of their weekly visit. As I greeted them, the rest of the family began to look at me and then look away. My curiosity went into overdrive, when, out of the shadows emerged my older sister and her husband, my niece and a grandniece who flew in from Coventry in England. Malia just looked at me and asked, “Are you surprised?” I was not only surprised but shocked.

Our family Mass followed the next day which was special because I was able to celebrate with family and those whose weddings I celebrated. Also, I was able to use the chalice given to me by my parents as an ordination present fifty years earlier in the same church. I thanked my family for their support and example and remembered those who had gone before us who shaped and moulded our lives.

Following the Mass, we were to set out for the family meal about an hour’s drive away. Then, I was informed that we were not ready to leave. There was one more surprise in store. The video projector cranked up and the large screen got ready for the surprise. A few black and white pictures from my ordination graced the screen before I was charmed by a series of video greetings and good wishes from some people I had known and ministered with while in Mississippi.

I was treated to video greetings from Coventry in England, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Hawaii, Hattiesburg and, of course, Bay St. Louis. As I listened to each one, I got a different perspective on relationship and how one can impact people’s lives and journeys. Viewing them was both humbling and gratifying.

At the end of the presentation, Malia approached me and asked, “Are you surprised?” Again, I was shocked and humbled and could only asked, “How were you able to get in touch with all those people?” The answer remained a secret.

“There is one more surprise we have for you,” Malia informed me. What else could there be, I thought. Then, my sister approached with a huge wrapped, framed picture and said, “This is from the family.” As I tore off the wrapping paper, it revealed a large collage of pictures, places, publications, prayers and honours received over my fifty years as a priest. It was such a fitting capsule of my priestly life in one frame.

“Let’s find the best place to hang it in your house?” suggested one of my nieces. Now, it hangs in a prominent place in my living room.

Family dinner followed after I was assured by Malia, “That is the end of the surprises.” I hoped so.

The adult in me had to hand over control of the celebration to my niece, Malia but, the child in me, enjoyed the “surprises.” The surprises made the celebrations less predictable and more enjoyable; less controlling and more humbling; less being in charge and more free spirited. I will continue to like “surprises,” especially in small doses.

Surprises make memories more special and the good Lord gives us memories so that we might have roses to enjoy in December.