

## Who's who, where

There is an old Irish saying that says, "a new broom sweeps clean but the old one is good for the corners." I am reminded of this saying when there is a changeover in a parish, especially in priest personnel.

I notice that when a new priest comes to his new parish, there is a certain uneasiness at first. Parishioners had gotten used to the former pastor and his *modus operandi*. Like an old pair of well-worn and broken in slippers, the tired, the true and the familiar is very comforting.

Initially, on the arrival of a new priest in the parish, some people jockey, trying to get into the good graces of the new priest. They bend his ear, invite him to be part of their select inner circle and let him know that they have special insight and knowledge of the parish, its inner workings, who to trust and who one should keep at a distance. I suppose it is only natural that such people claw their way into the limelight.

Jokingly, I often told a person I hired in my former parish that I hired them because of their knowledge of the relationships in the parish; who was related to whom; who was not on speaking terms with whom; who had been a pain in the rear end to the former pastor. Such knowledge, in any walk of life, can be an invaluable source of wisdom to a new arriving boss.

I thought of all this the other night as I sat around the kitchen table with some neighbors and listened to the conversation. Even though I was now a "local boy," who happened to be a priest also, I was privy to many of the insights, wisdom, gossip and updating that was shared during the evening.

Seeing that I was going to be ministering in their midst, such sharing proved not only insightful but also invaluable. Seeing that the parish did not have a resident priest for over ten years, I was being co-opted to bridge that gap.

As I listened to the conversation, I got insights into attitudes in the parish, expectations, relationships. I also got insights into how the people viewed priests; how they viewed the Pastoral Council who had been running the parish for the past ten years and how that same Council prided themselves in their role, their power and their own sense of importance. My question became: how does a returning "local boy" break through that elitism and help them broaden their horizons, attitudes and approaches to ministry? I sensed that I would encounter a certain sense of reluctance and cynicism on their part. Their unwritten and unspoken question might be, "who is he, even though he is one of us and has been away for over forty years, to come in here now and tell us how to run the show when we have been running it for the past ten years?"

In past years, when I came home on vacation, it was easy to keep a low profile and decide when, how, or if one would engage in its parish life. Now, it was going to be different. There was an unwritten expectation that "one of their own" was now back among them on a more permanent basis and there was the expectation that he would lead them.

Following my first weekend public Mass in my home parish, I reminded the people that, when someone comes home on vacation, the locals usually ask them two questions: "When did you come home?" and "When are you going back?" Such questions may seem a bit unusual at the outset but, depending on their relationship with the visitor, the questions could be either a welcome gift or a wish that one would go back to where one came from sooner. I reminded the parishioners that the answer to the second question was irrelevant in my case.

In the meantime, as this scenario works itself out, I will keep my two brooms. One will still clean the corners while the other may have a more sweeping effect.