

Remember to forget

I stopped by the Books-a-Million bookstore in the Edgewater Mall in Biloxi on my way back from seeing a patient at the Biloxi Veterans Hospital. I had discarded my clerical shirt for a blue one. Browsing through the various aisles of books, I picked up Ann Rice's Book, "Called out of Darkness – a spiritual confession." The cost - \$5.97 seemed like a bargain as I began reading the story of the New Orleans vampire queen's journey from atheism back to her roots in the Catholic faith. I continued browsing through the various aisles and sections to see if any other book might appeal to me.

As I turned away from one aisle and proceeded to another, I noticed someone watching me. A few minutes later, a young man dressed in a green T-shirt and probably in his mid-thirties entered my aisle and stood in front of me. Of stocky build and probably five foot eight in height, I was drawn to the message on his T-shirt. It said, "My mind wanders at times. Sometimes, it leaves me completely."

He asked, "Are you a priest?" Hesitantly, I said, "Yes!" as I wondered what might follow. Sometimes I yearn to be off duty and incognito so that I might be left alone to enjoy some down time. I notice that even many professionals yearn for the same off-duty space especially if they are out in public with family and friends.

"Where are you a priest?" he continued. I told him that I was presently stationed in Bay St. Louis. "Were you ever a priest at St. Thomas Aquinas?" he asked. "I said "Yes. I was there from 1988 to 2000." Then he added, "When I saw you around the corner, I recognized you from Hattiesburg. I had to text my sister to find out the name of the church in Hattiesburg." He opened up his cell phone and read out her text response.

He then volunteered that he used to go to Mass at St. Thomas and that he worked at the Post Office on campus while going to school. I asked him when he graduated and he indicated in 1994.

I asked him what he had been doing since graduation and he indicated that he drove a truck for eight years until the business went burst. Now, where was he working? He said that he had signed up to become part of the clean-up team hired by British Petroleum along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. But work was scarce because no oil had hit the Mississippi shores as yet.

We engaged in some other trivial conversation and parted. Later I found him sitting on one of the benches reading a magazine.

The message on his shirt continued to fascinate me. I notice that the things I need to remember, I forget and the things I need to forget I remember. As I grow older, names of people fade into a twilight zone while encounters with them still remain vivid and alive. So often, I hear myself saying, "Where do I know that person from?" as I try to recapture a past experience or encounter. So often I experience selective amnesia. The trouble is that someone else selects what should be discarded into my amnesia chasm. I am told that the older you get the more of the past you remember and the more of today you forget. It seems to be an age old problem.

Maybe, it is also a scriptural problem. The Lord gave Moses Ten Commandments. Later on, the smart and educated leaders of the time translated the ten into 613 precepts. Later, Jesus tried to undo their complications by narrowing them down to two great commandments.

Scott Peck, in his book, "The Road Less Traveled," begins with the statement, "Life is difficult." Some years later, in his sequel, he began with the statement, "Life is complicated."

Often our mind wanders when we pray. Maybe we should let it wander and let the heart take over. Maybe when our mind wanders and sometimes leaves us completely, we just have to have a heart to heart conversation with it.