

## **Traveling Companion: Old Priests don't retire; they just get reassigned**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

Presently, our priests can retire at age 65. Recently, the priests decided overwhelmingly to continue the same but many feel their voice may not matter. We are afflicted with the mentality that priests do not retire. Old priests don't retire; they are just reassigned.

Our church has always had a high expectation of priests and a low maintenance. This has been a trend in our church for a long time. We have treated religious brothers and sisters who dedicated their whole lives to teaching in our schools the same way. We expected them to work for grace, eat for less and finally retire with our blessing but little food or comfort to bless.

Our priests have had their confidences and souls shaken by the recent clerical sexual abuse crisis and are trying to rebound, refocus and continue to earn the trust of the people they love and serve.

Even when priests struggled with a vocation and eventually decided to leave the priesthood, we simply said, "thanks and goodbye." If they wanted to apply for laicization, we expected them to plead psychological disorders in order to engage the archaic process.

In the days of plenty, when rectories were filled with priests, a bishop usually sent a "birthday card" on the 65th birthday, asking the priest when he was retiring.

Now some say we cannot afford, financially and otherwise, to allow priests to retire at age 65. Appealing to priest's pocketbook does have some merit in that such pocketbooks are not too deep. Of course, listening to a priest's point of view, especially his health concerns, his stress levels, his mindset, his future plans would speak a lot louder.

In many professions, one can retire after a certain number of years. In the priesthood, it doesn't matter if a priest has given over forty of the best years of his life's blood, sweat, tears, energy and gifts. Any remaining life blood needs to be drained and when that has happened and we have drained him of his heart and soul, we can send him off to waste away in some rectory where another willing priest will be his caretaker.

As a church that prides itself in the dignity of the human person and bases our morality on such, we need to look inside our own house.

Yes, the church needs priests. But when a priest's worth is seen in terms of his usefulness, then priorities are scrambled. He is welcome as long as he is useful and there is a big difference between being "needed" and being "useful."

Yes, one is a priest for life. After all, a priest is buried in his "on the job" clothes. A priest "signed up" for this life. But he didn't sign up to be micro-managed as a commodity from within and without. The priest is "another Christ." But he is a Christ in human flesh, with needs, hopes, desires, feelings and gifts.

As a church, we need to move away from a crisis-management mentality to a more vision oriented approach. We need to rethink our providing a "service" mentality and replace it with a more "accountability" mentality on the part of everyone, realizing that we are all part of the priesthood of believers. We need to wean our laity away from a smorgasbord mentality to a more ownership of faith approach.

Many commentators suggest we are experiencing a "priest shortage" crisis and suggest a variety of ways to remedy it. Such remedies often include optional celibacy, opening the priesthood to married men, and opening the diaconate and priesthood to women.

Many fail to see "crisis" as an opportunity for growth and we don't enhance growth by a "business as usual" mentality. Our church history teaches us that vocations flourish when the challenge is greatest and the crisis more acute. Maybe, instead of putting out finger in the hole in the bark of Peter, we need some major surgery, performed by the able hands, wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit. So, can priests retire or will they be just reassigned? I hope the Holy Spirit speaks loud and clear and we have the courage to listen.