

A singular experience

When I served as pastor of O.L.G. in Bay St. Louis, the office staff remarked frequently that I was blessed to be a celibate priest. The ladies remarks often went like this: "I bet at the end of the day when we have gone home and that you have dealt with us all day, you go back to your room, close the door and thank God that you are not married and have a wife like one of us to deal with every day."

My response was to smile and hope that they had a wonderful evening. Eventually, I would retreat to my room, kick off my shoes and relax for the evening if I didn't have any meetings or evening appointments.

Now, as I think back, I probably realize that I would not have made a good husband and the good Lord probably knew that when he called me to be a priest. I would have been too stubborn, independent and would have to have it my way or someone would have to take the highway instead.

As a priest, maybe I missed family celebrations, birthdays, anniversaries and watching my nieces and nephews grow up during the last four decades.

Now that I am retired, I have not only a sense of such celebrations missed but have gained the realization that other opportunities keep unfolding themselves.

Eighteen years ago, the day after my niece, Malia's birth, I was asked to be her godfather. I accepted the honour as a privilege to play some part in her life as she grows up. I told her on her birthday that, now she was eighteen, there was no more room for moodiness, temper tantrums or outbursts of frustration because she didn't get her way. She was now a woman and needed to show it.

During the past three years, I have taken her to and from school on occasion; taken her to music lessons, to the local towns for shopping. Soon, she will take her driver's licence test. In the meantime, I accompany her as she drives to different places. I make sure that I do not comment negatively on her driving; rather I compliment her and I don't feel the need to be engrossed in prayer while she is driving.

Seeing that this is her final year in high school, her thoughts have turned to majors and college choices. Last week, I went with her to one of the colleges she may be interested in attending. Along the way, we chatted about her interests, her gifts and trying to find a match with a university that offered such opportunities. I watched her participate in the open day at the university as she engaged with presenters and professors. She asked the important questions as she tried to match various course modules to her areas of interest.

Later on, we sat in on some of the presentations by professors and deans. It gave her a perspective on what to expect next year. For me, the day reminded me of the open days I participated in while serving in Hattiesburg years earlier.

On the way home, we shared our experience and perspective on what the day meant to both of us. I had the opportunity, as well, of spending some quality time with my niece, Malia, and she was relieved that I was not bored by the day but actually enjoyed it. Next weekend, we are heading off to visit another campus for another open day. It, too, will give us some quality time together as we continue to share some insights, suggestions and experiences.

I feel privileged to have this time with my niece, Malia, and treasure the nuggets of sharings we engage in as we travel from place to place. This becomes all the more poignant because I realise she will be making her home in a college setting, far from the day to day banter we can share now.

Maybe, I miss the comments from the office staff at O.L.G. reminding me of how lucky I am not to be married. Yet, I am able to enjoy being a godfather, uncle, and friend to one very special young woman, Malia. It truly is a singular experience for some old priest who still has his faculties.