***You’re a Great Listener Father***

By the 1970’s high tech was on its way for the churches: telephone answering machines! Now instead of having the phone ring off the hook while the priest was out and the secretary was at lunch, people could connect. Well, at least some. One poor woman in the parish had greater liquid refreshment as the night went on and she discovered that her pastoral needs increased with each sip.

One night I came home late from a hospital visit, to discover that the entire answering tape “loop” had been used, and there was nothing left. I was concerned, and since this was one of the original versions, I had no idea how many calls were on the half hour tape. I began the play back only to discover that it was one caller, and as her sips increased while speaking to the tape, so did her enthusiasm. At the end she said, “We love you, Father, and one of the things I love most about you is that you’re a good listener.”

Well for one half hour she had my answering machine’s undivided attention, but it caused me to wonder if people simply needed to hear a human voice in the midst of their loneliness. I immediately had another telephone line installed and was able to negotiate a telephone number that could be remembered, 2-1-LORD (I’m not giving out the entire 7 digits on purpose.) Instead of “Dial a Prayer” we recorded daily messages that were jokes, anecdotes, stories, and seasonal meditations. On certain occasions we offered upcoming events, special holy days, and people for whom we were asking prayers. The main church telephone line was still for “church business” but the second line was a human (although recorded) voice with encouragement. Being a bit of an insomniac in those days I would hear the machine click on at all hours of the night, and from personal conversations later I was told how often in desperation people had called – the vast majority not even being members of the parish.

God is available to us at all times, but we must constantly find ways in which we can use technology not as a permanent substitute for a human person’s live voice, but as a temporary reminder that God is on call at all times and in all circumstances in life.