***Letting Go and Letting God***

Recently I was asked by someone if I had trouble “letting go.” It’s an intriguing question, and when I left the employ of U.S.Steel decades ago to go elsewhere, my mind rarely went back to making steel. The question really is, “Given the fact that priests have responsibilities for the ‘cure of souls’ is it easy to turn that off when the priest leaves?”

It has been said that people spend the first part of their life acquiring and the second part of their life giving away. When I walk into certain “Second hand stores” I generally see the adage living out, “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” So, what does this have to do with pastoral ministry?

At 75 years old I have “let go” of more responsibilities in the Church than I can even begin to list. My last ten years have been spent, in that regard, recognizing a liberating reality: “If you die tomorrow, you do know that God will find someone else to do what you are doing.” Not only is that a liberating thought, but it is true. Oftentimes when people look at us and ask, “Are you having trouble letting go” they really are saying, “If I were in your position, I would have a miserable time letting go of what you are letting go of.” Projection is often a normal way of doing self-assessment, because we start out with “how I am feeling” and then assume that everyone else responds the way we do. Listening carefully to “projection statements” will often allow us to learn more about the speaker than we could imagine.

In all of the many responsibilities I have handed over, there are several principles:

+Once you have no more responsibility in this role - it’s not your responsibility. You did what you were asked to do. “Let go - Let God.”

+When your replacement takes over — he needs your prayers and support — not your critique and criticism and judgment

+It is necessary and possible to love people from a distance, and the best way to do that is acknowledging first that they have always been God’s children and that for a season God had you being available to them on His behalf.

+When you leave — there will be a power vacuum and a scrambling for control. That’s sad, but it’s not your problem, and micromanagement has its own basis in stages of psychological development. Sadly, this is not uncommon in the Church.

+Being the “Ghost of Clergy Past” is not a gift. Remember, no matter how well you did in your role, and no matter how much you did, some people will have a need to tell others all of your faults and all that you did to offend them. The difficulty is that you will never have a jury “postmortem” and you were called to serve God, and your “defense” will be taken to the grave, because you know more than you can ever tell. It is better to be judged guilty in this world for what we could not divulge than it is to be guilty in the next for constantly defending ourselves.

So why are any of these matters an issue? Whether Clergy or Laity, we must always remember that another person’s bad behavior is not a justification for our own bad behavior. That is the way of the world, and as the saying goes, “When you blow out another person’s candle it does not make your candle burn brighter.” It also matters because there is a very important principle that separates the Clergy from the laity: Spiritual Authority.

Clergy are entrusted with the Cure of Souls. I can remember in 1989 moving from Pennsylvania to Texas having left a parish that I loved deeply and going to a parish where I knew very few so far. I turned to my wife and said, “My tenure as rector of St. Mary’s ended two days ago and my responsibilities do not begin for another week. This is the first time since I was ordained that I do not have direct responsibility for a large number of people.” Every day for thirteen years at St. Mary’s, I bore (joyfully) the responsibility of souls. And soon I would have the responsibility of more souls. But for almost two weeks I did not have a primary responsibility for the cure of souls, beyond being a father and a husband. These issues were not about “letting go”; these issues were about being accountable to God for those whom He had entrusted to me.

Very recently I have “let go” of three more responsibilities, and until the last hour of that day when my “term” ended I was responsible to God for what He had called me to do. That meant until the last moment being an advocate, an emergency respondent, a Sacramental presence, a Defender and a Spiritual Father to a particular group. This is why it is so very difficult to answer the question, “Are you retired?” My usual response is: “That’s what the Church Pension Fund and the Social Security Administration says.” Clergy cannot retire - at least not in the usual sense of the word. For many Clergy, once we are relieved of our obligation for the Cure of Souls we have a sense of relief, and in our polity that means “Now the Bishop takes it from here.” The Church is not a secular institution and we Clergy, in our understanding, were significantly changed at Ordination (ontological) so that means that while we may no longer have certain responsibilities related to the promises we made regarding WHERE we serve, we are never off the hook in terms of HOW we serve.

Therefore, letting go is really quite easy, because we know that people are God’s responsibility and I can recall recently regarding a former responsibility, looking at the clock on my last official day and feeling a great sense of relief. But a sense of relief does not mean not loving the people or the place where one has served. **It’s not like resigning from a job and turning in the keys, as is done in the secular world, but rather it means looking to Jesus and thanking Him for the joy of having served in a particular place and in a particular role, and then giving thanks for those who have now received that responsibility from God.**

But beware: if you or anyone else treats the Church as if she were primarily a business, never be surprised when there is conflict. Good business practices are translatable, provided that they are always secondary or tertiary to Two Thousand years of Christian Faith where all behavior and practices are held up against the Gospel - and in all matters, the Gospel must win.