

God, Life, and Everything 25 Years

Permit me a moment of reflection. Twenty-five years ago today, I celebrated my first Holy Eucharist as a priest.

The day before, I had been ordained at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. It was a cold day, and the Cathedral made for an imposing backdrop. It was there that I knelt down in front of the bishop as he placed hands on my head. At that same moment, dozens of priests gathered around me and also laid hands on my head, shoulders, wherever their hands would reach. The weight was crushing.

The next morning was a Sunday, and as tradition dictates, I was the priest of the day. Terror rose through my bones until my boss said, "Don't worry about messing up. My first mass, instead of saying 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us,' I said, 'Christ our Sacover is Passified for us.' Nobody freaked out."

To the best of my knowledge, I did not mess up, and nobody freaked out.

That day.

Over the next 25 years, I would freak out many people for many reasons, mostly because of words I uttered. Not long after that day, during the first Gulf War, the first President Bush called for a national day of prayer. My boss was away that Sunday, so I was covering for him. I told the congregation about the president's call and then reminded them that Jesus calls us to pray for our enemies - so we should pray in love for Saddam Hussein.

The storm came at coffee hour when an older man began yelling at me that I had no right to pray for that man other than that he burn in hell.

Surprisingly, however, most of my time is not spent raising hackles, upsetting the apple cart. Most of my time is spent writing sermons, planning worship, visiting people in the hospital or at their homes, taking part in some outreach ministry (like our after-school reading program), marrying, baptizing and burying both strangers and friends. Inevitably, a surprising amount of time is spent in meetings. Meetings could be a column all by themselves, but I think I'll pass.

But often enough, I find myself sitting one-on-one with someone in the midst of a personal crisis. Sometimes, it's about a relationship or work.

Sometimes, it's a faith crisis. I almost always feel like I'm doing the most good at those times because talking about God, thinking about God, being with God is what prompted me to become a priest in the first place.

Even that's not always fun. I've been in a surprising number of conversations (to put it politely) with people who insist I am a fraud or stupid or crazy - or all of the above - for being a priest. Only idiots, they argue, believe in God and only hucksters try to pawn God off on the gullible.

I remember one conversation in particular in which the person with whom I was speaking smiled and said, "You're going to get to the end of your life and realize your entire job has been a waste of time."

I don't know about that. If I'm wrong about God, I'll probably get to the end of my life and not realize anything at all because I'll just cease to exist. If I'm right, however, my conversation partner, may find a different experience at this end of his life. Not that I believe God is so petty as to eternally punish people who don't believe in this life. God thinks on a much longer time-line than we do, and I suspect many of the most

ardent atheists in this life may become some of the most devoted servants of God in the next.

But for the sake of argument, let's say I am wrong, and God doesn't exist. Have I wasted my life? Even then, I would say no.

Why?

Because in those years, I have held the hands of the dying, easing their transition from this life - and no matter what lies beyond, that's a good thing.

Moreover, I remind people on a daily basis that this life is short, and there's no to waste to get out and start loving others.

I have listened to who-knows-how-many people worried about whatever anxieties make their lives miserable, and that simple act eases the burden.

I have helped welcome many babies into the world and helped their young parents know that there is a community that supports and cares for them.

I have had an opportunity to stand up for the rights of the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the weak of this world. Perhaps if you don't believe in God, that seems like a fools errand, but those who suffer in the world seem to appreciate having someone stand with them.

In 25 years, I've been allowed to put my foot in my mouth innumerable times - always with the assurance that I'll be welcomed back at the altar. I've been allowed to speak my mind, share the burdens of others, have others share my burden, and exercise my creative spirit in ways I could only dream of.

And, in all those years, I've been able to spend time with God (even if it is, as my conversation partner told me, a delusion). God's presence hasn't always been clear to me, and there are times when I, too, have wondered if I was kidding myself. But then something happens: a look from a stranger, a coincidence that shouldn't happen, a moment of silence where I simply know.

So, as I begin the next 25 years of this odd ministry, I remind myself that we simply can't know what we're really doing. We can't know if the faith we've embraced is exactly the way God intends (I doubt any faith tradition has it exactly right). We can't even know if God really is.

But I think so.

And if I'm wrong, I think I can think of a lot worse ways to spend a life.