

GOD, LIFE, AND EVERYTHING

"To Friend or Not to Friend"

When I was just a baby priest, my boss warned me against becoming friends with individual parishioners. He said we were there to serve as priest, not to be buddies, and there must be some professional distance.

I mentioned this to my father not long afterwards, and his response was, paraphrased, "if you're not friends with your parishioners, what damn good are you?" It is a fine line we walk in ordained ministry... Are we pastor or friend? Where does one role stop and the other start?

This was brought to mind recently when I read an article by a colleague (which another colleague was sharing on Facebook) about how to interact with former parishioners after you have left a parish.

The short answer: don't.

The reasoning was that it is hard enough for a new rector (pastor, if you will), to establish him or herself. It does not help if the old pastor is jumping in every time there's a crisis or special occasion going on, especially weddings and funerals.

This is absolutely true. You have to let the new leader become the leader and establish the pastoral relationship you once had.

For the most part, by the way, this is no problem. There are three main reasons for leaving a parish: you retire, you go to a new parish, or you leave under pressure/negative feelings. (Oh, there is a fourth, which is if you die in your pastoral position - which three past rectors of St. James' have - but then you don't really have to worry about coming back - I hope!)

Clergy who leave under a cloud generally don't want to come back, certainly not very soon. Those who take on new parishes don't have the time: they're busy creating a new relationship. Those who retire... well, that can be tough, especially if they only retired because they reached the mandatory retirement age. But even then, the church has a way of keeping you busy, so very few retired clergy are left twiddling their thumbs or looking over the new guy's shoulder.

As I say, up to this point, I was with the article. Give new pastors the breathing room they need so parishioner accept them as the go-to person.

But then it went too far. It essentially said, if you love them, cut all ties. Sure, you can send Christmas cards, and maybe even friend them on Facebook, but that's it. Don't visit. Don't accept offers to attend weddings or funerals. Send a card, but never attend.

Again, I get that the new guy is the pastor and should be the liturgical leader in these situations. Remember, I've been the new guy more than once.

However, I have no objections to former clergy coming as a guest. I don't even have any objections to former clergy assisting in special liturgies like weddings and funerals. Here's why:

Our ministry is essentially one of relationship. Yes, there is a certain separation, and I have to be there for all parishioners, not just the ones I like best. But given that our religion is a relational religion (God is love...), how can parish leadership be anything but relational?

And that means being friends. That means growing to like some more than others because that's how people are. It means walking through some tough times together. It means holding hands, hugging, crying, laughing, and eating together - a lot.

To do this and to make it real - rather than just a job - means making yourself vulnerable to the pitfalls of friendship. It hurts bitterly, for example, when a friend dies or leaves for good.

So, when a pastor leaves, as we all must eventually, it is not merely quitting a job. These are real relationships, and to be real, they must be deeper than just a job.

Having said that, it is correct to say that relationships change. When I leave a place (as I have in the past, of course), I am no longer their pastor. I am no longer the go-to guy when they need pastoral counseling, or want to get married or have their baby baptized or get buried. I can, however, continue to be their friend.

And if that means returning to sit in the pew at a wedding or funeral, I can live with that.