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VINTAGE VOICE



My Litany of Saints

By the Rev. David K. Fly

I grew up in a tiny congregation, St. Stephen's, in Monett, Missouri. St. Stephen's was a "training ground" for new clergy. There was a constant procession of freshly ordained priests who wandered in and out of our lives, each with some new vision of what the "True Church" should be about and ready to impose that vision on this very seasoned congregation. Some clergy announced that they would institute a mid-week Eucharist. Others decided that twice-weekly services were better. And one guy firmly believed that the Kingdom of God depended on daily Mass.

Without fail, my grandmother and great-aunt Susie (the only altar guild we had) attended every service. For a long time, I thought it was religious piety that led my relatives to be there, and so did all those new clergy! Here they were in their new congregations, celebrating the Eucharist at the crack of dawn with these two women faithfully attending. The clergy, I suspect, went off to clergy conferences and extolled these faithful women. And I wouldn't be surprised if one or two of them didn't also manage to extoll himself — and his religious innovations — for inspiring such remarkable faithfulness.

All that was put in an entirely new light for me when I finally asked my great-aunt why she and my grandmother attended all those services. "Well, David," she explained, "if we weren't there, nobody would be, and the young man would feel bad. After all, this is his first church. We want this to be a good beginning for him." She paused, then added, "He means well, you know." What a lovely sense of respect for a young man who had really done nothing yet to deserve it! Paul Tillich's definition of grace is "acceptance." And, if acceptance is what grace is, those young clergy got a good dose of it from those two ladies.

Every priest has been ministered to by people like my grandmother and great-aunt. They have taught us and formed us in the ways of God even if we didn't realize it at the time. We who are called to be "blessers" have been blessed over and over again by the people we serve.

As a young priest, I remember the first time I realized that it was I who was receiving the blessing and not the other way around. It was my very first hospital call — to see someone named Martha, who was dying of cancer. I was 25 years old and scared to death. I'd never really been in a situation like this before. In fact, I had never been around people in the hospital all that much. All the way to the hospital, I practiced what I would say, including the words of the service for communion from the reserved sacrament. I entered Martha's room and stepped up to Martha's bedside, my communion kit in hand. She looked so frail. She said, "Oh, you're the new priest at the Cathedral, aren't you? Don't be afraid." My heart stopped. I couldn't speak. She seemed to read my mind. I just nodded my head. "I understand," she said. And she lay there and talked to me about dying and about her faith and then told me how grateful she was that I had come to see her, and she asked for communion. Few moments in my life have touched me more.

Years later, I took communion to an old woman named Catherine, who was very frail and close to death. I stood by her bed. We talked for a while about many things, and she said, "Oh, I'm sorry. It must be such a hot day. You look really thirsty." With shaky hands, she lifted her paper cup of lemonade to my lips and let me drink. I had been given communion.

It's amazing how our ministries have been formed and nourished by the people we serve. Some years ago, I learned that a man I knew in my early ministry had died. Herb spent a good number of years battling alcoholism and spent a considerable amount of time in mental institutions. But each return from illness was a time for ministry to other people. He's the only person I've ever met who actually gave away his overcoat in the middle of winter to a man who had no coat. And he wrote letters to me, letters filled with poetry that spoke of his desire to be used by God. Here's one I received in the summer of 1968. I still carry it with me.

Could I be that block of stone, pulled from the earth
Full of flaws and out of shape
That holds the wall?
Shape me, O God, with your sharp chisel
And strong blows of love,
So that I may join the arch
And bear the strain.
But should I be too frail,
Set me in the wall,
Where I may blend my strength
And do your work.
And if I am still too weak,
Lay me in the earthy path
That keeps others from sinking
While they walk your way.

It's been many years since I knew these people, but they are always with me. There has been a long procession of others who, in caring for others, have cared for me. My grandmother, my great-aunt, Martha, Catherine and Herb were early members of my litany of saints and each year, as I approach All Saints' Day, the memories of them come flooding back.



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