

June 24, 2018

From Fr. Jim . . .

A Ministry Of Presence: What I appreciate the most about Pope Francis is that he seems to put much importance on pastoral ministry and on creating a ministry of presence within the church. I am reminded of something that my priest/pastor/supervisor said to me in my diaconate assignment in 1978 which was a year before I was ordained a priest in 1979. When he and I sat down to discuss what my ministries, duties and responsibilities would be, he said, "Jim, the only thing I want you to do is to create a ministry of presence. Whatever you do just be present to the people."



I really think this is a right and appropriate expectation of the people of God to expect from their priests and I believe my supervisor was a very wise man. But a ministry of presence begs a very important question: what does it mean to be present to someone or what is a ministry of presence all about? I confess to you that it took all of my time as a deacon to explore this and it is taking all of my 39 years as a priest to try to answer this question.

Any answer that I attempt to give, I have learned by trial and error. I am still learning what a ministry of presence is about but I am clearer on what a ministry of presence is not about. A ministry of presence can't just be about trying to be at every parish event, service, meeting and function. A ministry of presence can't always be about trying to please everyone or make everyone happy. A ministry of presence isn't about always being in control or needing to be the center of attention all the time. In fact, a ministry of presence has little to do with my presence and it has more, if not everything to do, with the presence of God.

At any given time and any given place, no matter where we are or who we are with, God is present with us and always in our midst. A ministry of presence always involves being aware of God's presence, calling upon this presence, deferring to this presence, living with this presence and giving thanks and praising God for this presence. When we are present to one another, we are with the presence of God and we bring God's presence to each other and help one another discover and appreciate the presence of God in each and every one of us. When we are pastorally present to another, we love that person as we know God has loved us. What would it take to symbolically and figuratively wash their feet? This, I believe, is the vocation of every baptized Christian.

In a parish, it is especially the call of every staff person and lay minister in the church. Just as the Lord Jesus, could not be physically present to everyone all the time and in order for others to know him throughout the whole world, he needed disciples and apostles to live in the Spirit and bring his presence to all others. Especially, in today's church, the pastor needs help in order to bring the presence of Christ, certainly to the whole world but also to the people in the parish and to all for whom the church is called upon to serve. If the presence that we bring is truly the Lord's, then all ministers are important and valuable and when one person visits another in the Lord's name, then they are also visiting in the name of the pastor and the entire community of faith. When the pastor visits someone in the name of the Lord, then he also visits in the name of the entire staff and the community of believers. If at any event or meeting, when staff members or the faithful call upon the Lord's presence, then they should also be present with and to all who are united to the Lord. I am learning that an approach like this one and an understanding of this kind can be helpful in dealing with a shortage of priests and ministers in the church today.

At the heart of a ministry of presence is to know that each and every one of us is blessed to know the Lord and in any given time and place and with everyone we meet, we can put on Christ and witness to the virtues of his love. This is our way to unity and peace for diversity and even among division. As long as someone is bringing us Christ and the love of God, it should not matter to us who that person is. "Blessed are the feet of those who bring us Good News."

Let us pray that every minister of God's presence is received and welcomed. Another challenge with creating a ministry of presence is that it seems more difficult to do this with family and co-workers. Do we assume that we don't need it? Do we not take the time? Do we just take it for granted? Are we afraid we won't be received well or accepted? Family members, co-workers, fellow ministers, and staff hunger all the time for the presence of God from and within their peers. Lord free us to be ministers of your presence all the time with everyone we meet, work with and live with and grant us the grace to always accept and welcome your presence from anyone you send to us. Amen.

Our trip to Guatemala was a ministry and sharing of God's presence: we to them and them to us. Thank you for your prayers and thank you all for being present to each other and all others with the presence of God's love and grace.