



In Joy and Hope

by

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Turning 60

One of the most enjoyable ministries that I share with the Church of Western Washington is celebrating the Eucharist with school children. I always find these celebrations to be filled with enthusiasm and life. At the end of the liturgy, I always offer the young people an opportunity to ask me questions.

Over the years, the questions asked by young people are often surprising, and challenging. However, there is always one question which a second or third grader will ask: "How old are you?" I have always responded honestly to this question, and last month, when this question was raised, I responded by saying, "I just celebrated my 60th birthday."

As soon as you say the number, "60," there is a loud audible gasp from the young people. They sort of look at you and ask the question, "How can you still be alive?"

A time to look back

Well, I feel very much alive. Yet, turning sixty years of age and entering the seventh decade of one's life does prompt one to look back at all that has taken place during one's lifetime. I feel very fortunate to have been a part of the world and the church during these past 60 years. There is no doubt that I have lived through, and I continue to do so, a world often in turmoil and a church in transition. If any one word characterizes all that has occurred, it would be the word "change."

Our world has undergone tremendous changes as a result of wars and revolutions. It's hard to believe we live in a world of instant communication which saturates our senses. Technology in almost every field of human endeavor continues to boggle the mind and the imagination.

Within the church, change has also been our experience, especially as a result of the Second Vatican Council. For some, there have been too many changes; for others, the changes need to continue and serious issues need to be addressed. And yet, despite this tension, living as a member of the church has been and continues to be an exciting and grace-filled experience.

A time to look ahead

Sixty years of life certainly does give one a perspective to look back on past events. But it is also a time to look ahead. As I look at our world today, I do have hope that the quest for peace will become a reality. I look ahead to a world where we can translate the rhetoric of eliminating poverty, homelessness, and hunger into concrete responses. I believe with all my heart that we are capable of respecting each other for the human dignity God has given us by eliminating all prejudice and racism. Yes, I am an optimist when it comes to looking at the future. But an optimist also knows that the future will be shaped by what we do at the present moment.

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I also look to the future of the church with hope. We credit the Holy Spirit for opening the windows of the church through the Second Vatican Council. Yet, that same Holy Spirit is present today to be with and guide the church in its ongoing challenge to be faithful to the Gospel and our tradition. I deeply regret the divisions in our church today which separates people into almost warring factions on issues of liturgical renewal, the gift of human sexuality, the role of women and issues of social justice. There is the ongoing division between Christian churches. Such conflicts can be discouraging, and yet I believe it could be part of the Paschal Mystery as we go through experiences of death and resurrection in being faithful to the ministry and mission of Jesus.

A time to give thanks

More than anything else, turning sixty made me aware of how grateful I am to people who have been and continue to be part of my life. To my parents and family, I can never express adequate gratitude. To friends, I owe so much for their ongoing support and encouragement. I especially give thanks to God for the ministry I share as priest and bishop. I never dreamed that a response to a vocation to be a parish priest would take me on such a unique journey from Chicago to Montana to Western Washington. It has been and continues to be a life-giving and energizing experience.

Turning sixty might prompt loud gasps of disbelief from a group of young school children, but turning sixty has made me aware more than ever of the gift of life. I give thanks for the 60 years that have been given to me. And I certainly look forward to the years ahead. May God's grace and peace be yours.