

A NOTE FROM FR. PHIL



I am a misfit.

When I was ordained I thought surely I would follow the path of most priests: a couple of gigs as an associate, followed by a few more appointments as a pastor. Didn't happen. I hadn't even finished my first assignment when Bishop Breitenbeck chose me as the vocations director of the Diocese. A few years later, I became the director of our seminary and diaconal programs. Afterwards, I asked to go on for further studies in spirituality at Regis College in Toronto. While in Canada I lived with the Brothers of the Good Shepherd who ran a refuge center for the homeless.

I returned to the Diocese of Grand Rapids and was named director for the continuing formation of priests and administrator of St. Joseph's Church in Muskegon.

My tenure in Muskegon was short. One year. Bishop Rose brought me back to Grand Rapids so that I could live with two other priests and four laymen in an experimental community. We lived at St. James, but I worked at another parish that was an easy walk away. The fledgling community never got up off the ground because it was too difficult to balance seven schedules at seven different work places. That and the laymen eventually left and married. Imagine that. They started their own communities.

Moving from Saint James, I bought a small house in Grand Rapids. I continued to live there even when I was appointed pastor of Holy Family Parish in Sparta. That's right, that other Holy Family Parish. After five years there, Bishop Rose gave me permission to go to New Melleray Abbey, a Trappist monastery, near Dubuque, Iowa, for six months. There I learned some basics about farming, carpentry, and mopping floors. And, of course, about the contemplative life. I have been living a semi-monastic life (if there is such a thing) ever since, helping in parishes for short periods as needed. In fact, I was blessed by being sent to Holy Family in Caledonia for a few months after Fr. Dave LeBlanc left.

I am a misfit: I have one foot in monasticism, the other in ministry. While most diocesan priests recognize their ministry as their prayer, I discovered that it is my prayer that has become my ministry. Bishop Walkowiak seems to respect that. He calls me, "Fr. Phil-In." And now he has asked me to "fill in" part-time at Holy Family in Caledonia. I have mixed feelings about this assignment. I really like this community, but, I am saddened by Fr. Loc's departure. He is one of my best friends. On the other hand, this time away from ministry may be a blessing for him. When I took my leave of absence, it became a real blessing for me and for my ministry.

I will continue to live in my house in Grand Rapids and commute to Caledonia on most days as needed. Of course, if the weather is bad, I have a beautiful rectory here in which to stay. Fr. Loc even bought me some new bedding and pillows. The schedule will remain the same. Sacraments will be celebrated and parish life will continue. Because my tenure here likely will be short, I will try to adapt to you rather than ask the parish to adapt to me. I am delighted how well Fr. Loc and the parish leadership has organized things and I will leave policies and procedures as they are.

So, there you have it. Pray for this misfit. Pray for Fr. Loc. We are praying for you.