

## From Fr. Fleming's Desk

*I'm often asked what it is I do on a weeklong silent retreat. Well, much of that depends on where God's Spirit leads me through prayer during the course of the week. At Eastern Point Retreat Center last week I found myself drawn to thank God for the many blessings I've known in my life. My first thought was of my parents and that's how I came to write this letter to them. I'd like to share it with you here, to give you an idea of some of what I do on retreat - and to share with you my gratitude for the gift my parents were in my life. Perhaps in this season of gift-giving, you might write a similar letter to someone you're grateful for, prayerfully thanking God, for the gifts you've received in your life.*

Dear Mom and Dad,

I miss you! I love you and I miss you... You've been gone a long time: you, Dad, 43 years ago, more than half my lifetime; and you, Mom, 24 years ago, the whole of my time in Concord.

Dad, I wish you had still been here when I went to study at Notre Dame - Mom used to tell me how much you would have loved my being there! I wish you'd been there when I received my degree and when I stayed on for three more years to work in Campus Ministry. I would love to have shown you around campus with Mom when she visited in South Bend.

And how I wished you could have shared in my joy, Dad, when I was appointed pastor of Our Lady Help of Christians in West Concord. News of that came just before Mom went into the hospital for her valve replacement. But you never came home that summer Mom... I visited you at Lahey in Burlington and at THC in Peabody from March to August. I kept delaying my installation as pastor, hoping you could be there, but God had other plans.

I can't count how many times over these past 24 years when I've thought, "I wish Mom and Dad could be here for this!" And "this" was anything from a regular Sunday morning mass to the Triduum in Holy Week. I wish you could have seen what a wonderful parish is the Catholic community in Concord and that you could have taken part in what I've done there in my ministry.

I'm thinking about all this because it's almost Christmas. I so clearly remember my first Christmas in West Concord at Our Lady's. I remember how, when the music began for the entrance song at the vigil mass on Christmas eve, *O, Come All Ye Faithful*, I remember choking up and tears running down my face as I thought how wonderful it would have been if you'd been there for Christmas in my first pastorate. In fact I've had that very same experience before nearly *every* Christmas mass since then - how I wish you could be there with me...

After a year or two in West Concord we added singing *Silent Night* after Communion. That song always reminds me of you, Mom, letting Ruthie and me help you arrange the crèche in our living room on Hobart Street in Danvers. (John wasn't born yet: he was a Christmas gift who wouldn't arrive until some years later!) Well, that's one of my earliest (maybe *the* earliest) of my childhood memories. And I remember you teaching us the song, *Silent Night*, Mom and that's why I love singing it after Communion at every Christmas mass, every year.

I miss you, Mom and Dad, for so many reasons and mostly because of how much you loved me and Ruthie and John. Dad, you worked so hard and so long at jobs I'm sure you weren't keen on but you never failed to provide for us - or to be with us in spite of some of the crazy shifts you worked. Mom, you were the loving anchor in our household, always gentle, caring and protective. The three of us kids were truly blessed by having you as parents! I'm on retreat right now and I'm praying over the many ways God has blessed me in my life and I realized right away that you, my parents, were God's first sign of favor to me - and for that I will always be grateful to God and to you. Imagine! Even before I was born, God's love for me was waiting for me in the world outside the womb, waiting in the arms of a mother and father who gave me everything they had: life, love, faith, family and so many memories of so many simple joys.

I have no doubt you're in God's arms now, in God's peace forever... and I pray that one day I'll see you again when we're all gathered together in the kingdom Jesus promised us. But, well... it sure would be nice to see you again now! I remember, Mom, a couple of years after we lost Dad, I remember asking you about missing him. You told me you missed him every day but that you had accepted his passing. Then you said, "Sometimes I sit at the window by the kitchen table and look down the street and wish that one more time I'd see Dad's car coming home from work and he'd pull into the driveway and come into the house and give me a kiss and we'd have one more cup of tea together..." Well, I miss you both and wish that I could look out into the pews on a Sunday morning (or Christmas Eve!) and see the two of you sitting there across the Lord's Table from me, praying - and maybe singing *Silent Night*...

I'm on retreat, Mom and Dad, and I'm thanking God for the many gifts I've receive in my life - so I'm thanking God for the two of you. So, it's certainly appropriate for me to thank *you* at the same time. There's no way I could begin to separate out the many strands of lived experience that have shaped me to be the human being, the man, the believer, the priest I am. All I know is that you are two great strands in the weaving of who I am and that God is the source and heart of it all. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Love,  
Austie

