Opinion
Spirituality



(Dreamstime)



by Mark Piper

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She summoned me and I followed. Crossing the gym along the makeshift buffet line, we weaved in and out of groups of people conversing. She said she wanted to introduce me to the bishop. Moments after that unexpected declaration, she

stopped leading me and a guy who looked like any other priest (Roman collar, black suit jacket, bald, white, older) turned around and she said enthusiastically, "I wanted you to meet Mark Piper. He knows all his prayers."

All my prayers! I knew the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be; that was it. I couldn't remember the Act of Contrition to save my soul. My eyes might have bulged at her comment. This was the bishop. He must know all prayers, of which there must be thousands, maybe millions? I knew three. What if he asked me to recite one I didn't know? Momentary terror stuck until she continued, "We're very proud of him."

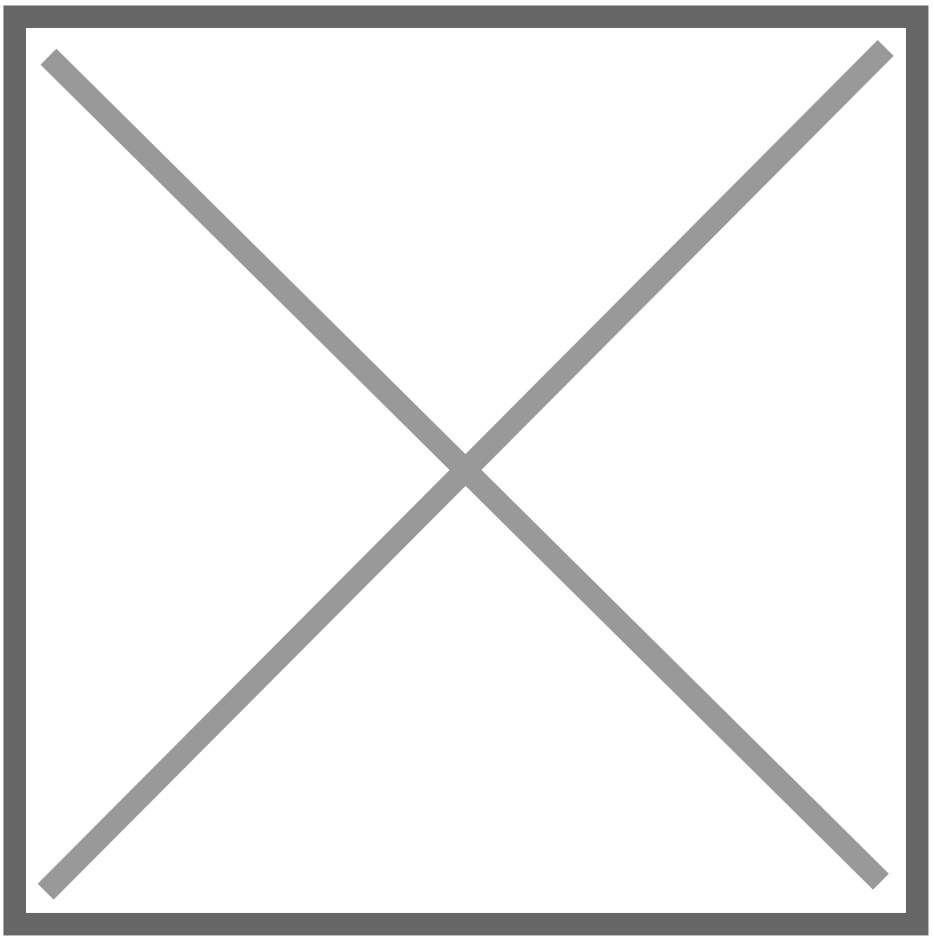
The bishop was pleasant, though I cannot remember which bishop it was; it could have been Bishop William Bullock of Madison, Wisconsin, or Auxiliary Bishop George Wirz. What I do remember was how she, Sr. Fintan, principal of St. Ann School, was brimming with excitement and pride to tell the bishop about me and my vastly-overstated knowledge of prayers.

I was eight or nine years old when this happened. It was spring, early evening, and we had gathered in the school gym for a 60th birthday party for our parish priest. My mind queues up that memory and Sr. Fintan in general, with regularity now.

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For instance, a few months back, a priest invited me to lunch, and somewhere between ordering our food and receiving it he asked me very seriously, "What keeps you in church?" To which I had the instantaneous flashback to that memory of Sr. Fintan in the school gym, telling the bishop that I knew my prayers and that she was proud of me. And so, the inevitable, "Why?" Why does this memory populate when asked that question?

The best answer as to why I think of her, especially when making a conscious choice to stay in the church or affirm my faith, is comprised of three parts. First, in this episode she communicated that I, along with prayers, were of value; I felt valued and placed greater value on learning my prayers.



Second, because she articulated that value, I started moving from an inherited faith to an intentional faith. Succinctly, she put the onus on me. It was I who knew the prayers, and it was I who they were proud of. It wasn't simply the faith of my family, the religion my parents were responsible to inculcate in me. Now the responsibility shifted, no longer an inherited, hand-me-down faith but rather the beginning of my own spiritual life for which I would be responsible. I suppose from infant baptism our faith lives are all inherited, with parents and godparents lighting the fire under our feet. Eventually if the seed of faith they plant is to grow, we need not an external fire but an inner fire, burning in our hearts.

The third part has to do with another memory of Sr. Fintan. Roughly 10 years after she declared that she was proud of me, I was preparing to graduate from high school. It was 2006 and the Sisters of Nazareth, Sr. Fintan's congregation, were closing their convent in Stoughton, Wisconsin, and leaving St. Ann School. Sr. Fintan had already been sent to California some years before. We had been in touch two years earlier when I emailed her and asked for a little guidance related to the 2004 presidential election. I couldn't understand why John Kerry, a Catholic, encountered

visceral voices in the church who wished to deny him the Eucharist. She replied with her thoughts, summed up as, let your well-formed conscience be your guide. And that was it by way of communication until a week before my high school graduation. She mailed a graduation present, specifically the book the *The Virtues of an Authentic Life* by Bernard Häring.

I have read that book cover-to-cover more than a dozen times. I hope I've not made an idol out of it, but it is my most valued possession. A gift, a good read, but most importantly a formerly blank page with an inscription:

> To Mark with congratulationsfor all the honors of your graduation. You are a credit to yourself, your parents and theparishioners of St. Ann's. May God's wishes be fulfilled in you.
>
> Sr. Fintan

That book, that inscription, is sacramental for me; something tangible and real to manifest intangible values and memories — happy memories — of Sr. Fintan. When I've been laid low by the cruel or humbling vicissitudes of life and self-doubt reigns, I pull that book off the shelf and re-read that inscription to remind me that all is not lost. I'm no scholar of language, but I rather enjoy the fact that the book she gifted me is a souvenir of my faith.

So why am I in church? Because in this life I believe the highest goods are to love, to serve and to remember. Sr. Fintan, and others, taught me that. The church of Christ remains the body where I believe I can best be of service, can love and can remember the sacredness or beauty of all life.

Sr. Fintan and I last had contact in 2016. I know she celebrated 60 years of religious life earlier this year. Recently, I reached out to her community. She is still alive, but it would be impossible for me to communicate with her and she wouldn't remember who I was. For any person working with or taking care of someone whose mind is surrendered to memory loss, I know it's tough. Without memory, how much more difficult is it to love and to serve?

I suspect that were it not for those memories of Sr. Fintan, or rather for the grace of God I experienced through her, I wouldn't have had lunch with a priest, let alone be asked what keeps me *in* church. I wouldn't be planning on going to Mass on Sunday,

and I may not have read my morning prayers, either those written words in my prayer book or the unwritten words in my heart.

I close not with a line from Häring's book, but from his fellow German, Meister Eckhart, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough." And so I say, thank you. Thank you, Sr. Fintan, for exhibiting the virtues of joy and enthusiasm; the world is changed by examples, not opinions. Thank you to all people who communicate the value of prayers and who value people. May God continue to animate, inspire and direct all educators in being examples for children to understand their worth and the significance of their faith.

To this day, I cannot recite the Act of Contrition by memory. But, recalling that evening at St. Ann's where Sr. Fintan first shared her pride in me and my prayers, today I'll add an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be in addition to my thanks to God for her and her example. Amen.

[Mark Piper, a Packers fan in an unholy land, works in the nonprofit sector and resides in Chicago with his family. He is an alumnus of Amate House, an AmeriCorps-approved year of service organization sponsored by the Chicago Archdiocese.]

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