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A new pastor

Joe Ferullo | Oct. 7, 2009 NCR Today

I've been a Catholic for a long time -- but this Sunday, I'll witness something I've never seen before: the installation of a new pastor.

My childhood parish in the Bronx [1] had the same pastor during all the years I was there, a Capuchin named Fr. Charles with a thick Italian accent and a few remaining wisps of gray hair -- lost, I'm sure, trying to keep his poor parish afloat.

I remember one sermon Father gave when I was in fourth grade, urging people to please give more when the baskets came around -- so far that year (it would have been 1966 or 1967), donations were averaging seven cents per week per parishioner. When we got home, my mother told my father about this -- he worked seven days a week at the family bakery, so never got to Mass. He laughed some as he shook his head and asked my mother if we could give more from the household allowance. She said she would try.

When I left the Bronx for college and career, I either stayed away from church or was only an occasional visitor -- a "recurring character" we'd call it in the television business, someone who drops in and out of the story as needed. I was certainly never at one parish long enough to feel part of it, or see its pastors come and go.

But slowly, like so many others, I came back to the church as a full member of the cast. Things, of course, had changed: finding pastors for parishes now is like a game of chess with too few pieces. Here in Los Angeles pastors must move on every seven years -- though some are allowed to extend their stay a bit. Pastors like Fr. Charles, who were guideposts throughout the childhoods of many, are no longer.

The former pastor here in my parish had been grandfathered in under the old rules from the glory days of we-have-plenty-of-priests. He headed up the parish for 27 years, marrying couples, baptizing their babes, marrying those children, and seeing their new infants arrive as well. This past June, he retired -- and now parish officers are digging out old documents, dusting off the pages and learning what it means to "install" a new pastor.

It's a first for a lot of us here. And it's a good first. There's an excitement in the parish; the new pastor is an energetic man with a great sense of humor and astounding people skills. (Ten o'clock Mass on Sundays often starts late, because he is caught up in conversation with people in the pews and loses track of time. As a man with two daughters who often struggles to get to church on time, I find this glorious.)

For me, this "first" is a sign that I found my second home -- a place that feels as much a part of me as my childhood parish did. A place for my family to grow up in, and around which my kids can build their lives and memories. We are here to stay.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/when-vatican-ii-came-bronx