

Far away from the chancery
Parish Diary
Fr. Peter Daly
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Fr. Peter Daly talks about setting a trajectory in a priestly career.

Back in the seminary we used to sing “All I want is a rectory, far away from the chancery.”

Years later, I got my wish. I am about 50 miles away from the chancery, in bad traffic. I almost never go to the chancery office. We communicate by telephone and e-mail. That’s enough.

My remote location has an up side and a down side.

The upside is that I don’t know much about what is going on in the Archdiocese. The down side is that I don’t know much about what is going in the Archdiocese. Big upside. Small downside.

Younger priests often think they would like to be involved with the big doings at the Archdiocese. But pretty quickly we learn that the real work of the Church is in the parish, not the corridors of the chancery. Our work is measured in people, not paper.

In parish ministry we form a real bond of connection with people. Parish priests get to see the action of grace at work in their people’s lives.

I have been here in this parish 17 years. I’ve seen people grow up and grow old. I’ve been present for the birth of the babies and the death of our elderly. I’ve visited them in hospitals, jails, drug treatment centers, nursing homes, half way houses and ordinary house. I’ve been in every funeral home and most regular homes in my parish territory. It forms a bond of intimacy.

This year at confirmation the auxiliary bishop was talking about how much he misses parish ministry. At the end of the confirmation mass I asked the youth how many of them I had baptized. Practically everybody raised their hand. That is a gratifying feeling to a priest. It is the closest we come to being a parent and seeing our children grow up.

Most bishops were probably secretaries to bishops. They spend much of their lives in the administration of the church. It is more about rules than relationships at that level.

Chancery offices revolve around canon law. They generate and enforce policy manuals. They set norms and standard and rules and regulations. All that stuff is necessary to keep the church off the shoals of disaster. But none of chancery work teaches the central thing about parish ministry.

The central thing about parish ministry is love. You have to love the people you work with and work for. You have to see them as part of your own family. After a while in the parish it is not so much about “them” as it is about “us.”

This also has its up side and down side. The up side is that even in a celibate life you find love. The down side is that you share in a lot of people’s sorrows and pain. Big up side, small down side.

Sometime in every career we have a choice to make. We can decide if we want to be “in the field” or “in the office.” My doctor said he had to make the same choice. He had to decide if he wanted to teach medicine or practice medicine. He decided on practice.

Priests are the same way. We have to decide if we want to focus on the life of the parish or academia or administration. I suppose the right answer depends on the person.

But for me the right answer was clear almost from the start. I wanted to be with people. That is where I see the action of grace. That is where souls are saved, lives are changed, and love is found.