



Pastor's Pen

February 3, 2019

- Fr. Tom Wilson, Pastor

FIDELITY

A few weeks after my ordination, an older priest called and asked if I wanted to be part of a *Jesu Caritas* priest prayer group with him and five other priests. I knew him and knew of the others, ordained many years ahead of me. One of them, Fr. Paul Lafontaine, was a classmate of Fr. Tiffany's at the seminary. The invitation propelled me into what became a bedrock for my life in priesthood. Since I joined that group in 1996, we have met monthly to pray together, and to share our lives in priesthood, prayer, and personally. We have had one turnover, as one of our number left to become a bishop and another younger priest joined us.

It turned out the "old guys" were particularly helpful, especially in my early years when I had a pastor who was a great priest, but not a particularly good teacher. They shared wisdom, encouragement, and helpful correction. Fr. Lafontaine was an incredibly bright and well-read man, who had a completely different set of gifts than I had. He taught me theology, while I tried to teach him a few things about economics and management.

Far more important than any knowledge of content was his faithfulness as a priest to Christ, His Church, and his brother priests. I no longer remember what the context was, but early on, I told the group I was going through a time of stress. He called me a few days later and asked how I was doing. I told him I was having some minor chest pains. Whatever he was doing, he stopped and met me someplace near my parish to inquire further. He reminded me that whatever it was I was going through was not worth chest pains in my 30's, and I should see a doctor. The chest pains went away quickly. I was grateful he would take time out of his busy pastor schedule to look in on me. It said a lot about his reverence for both the priesthood and brother priests.

Shortly after that incident, his brother died from a pulmonary disease that also took the life of their father years earlier. He told us that he had not been diagnosed with the disease yet, but the genetic disease would likely come his way. It did. About ten years ago, he was officially diagnosed with the disease that caused shortness of breath and began to limit his movement. The gift of medical research and experimental treatment kept him functioning well for many more years. He went into early functioning retirement about four years ago, and complete retirement about a year ago. Just before Thanksgiving we were told he could no longer leave his room and celebrate Mass, so priests volunteered to offer Mass with him at the Little Sisters of the Poor. He died the evening of December 10.

As his disease progressed and he weakened, he was blessed with a sense of peace about him. His sharing became abbreviated because he was doing little direct ministry, but he openly talked about the side-effect of imminent death. His acute awareness of his own death was a tool to keep his prayer focused. Worries dissipated. He became more uncomfortable physically, and basic everyday activities like taking a shower became grueling. Despite all that, he was both reticent and peaceful. The physical and mental part of prayer were difficult but being present to God and God being present to him filled that potential void.

I saw him right before I went on retreat over Thanksgiving and offered Mass with him. I sensed then that he would not make it much longer. I asked him if he was ready to meet God face to face. He responded, "As ready as I will ever be." It turned out it was the last time I saw him after seeing him monthly for over 20 years.

The caricature of priestly culture often presented is grossly inaccurate. Clerical "culture" as it were, and lived out well, is Christian discipleship. Fellow believers and those with a common call sharing the journey with Christ, praying together, and passing wisdom to the next generation. I'm glad the senior priest, Fr. Paul Lafontaine, chose to share part of that walk with me.

Rest in Peace, Paul.