

The Reunion
William F. Powers
Commonweal

Cocktail in hand, I walked up to a group of three of my classmates at the gathering that marked the fiftieth anniversary of our ordination as priests. As I joined these men with whom I had spent six years of my youth, one of them, Frank, asked, "Have you had heart bypass surgery?" Taken aback by the question, I answered that I had not. With a mixture of pride and resignation, he said, "The three of us have."

Along with the fifteen other men in the dining room of the Immaculate Conception Center in Queens, New York, we four had knelt in 1959 before a now-deceased bishop, dedicating our lives to the service of the church in the dioceses of Brooklyn and Rockville Centre. At the time, we couldn't see fifty weeks ahead, let alone fifty years. We certainly never anticipated the changes in the church that would pull the rug from beneath our feet.

Although most were assigned to parishes upon ordination, a few of us were first sent to Puerto Rico to study Spanish. On our return we became "Spanish priests," stumbling through Masses, baptisms, confessions, and weddings in that unfamiliar tongue. Whatever our assignment, we were all confident that we would serve the church as priests with humble, obedient fidelity for the remainder of our lives. Some of us did; others, like me, removed the Roman collar after a number of years and ventured into the world of marriage, parenthood, and second careers.

Of the nineteen men at our reunion, ten had remained active as priests. Three of them live right there in the retired priests' wing of a

fortress-like building designed to house college-level seminarians. The marble floors echoed with the hum of motorized wheelchairs, as priests no longer able to walk maneuvered their way through the dark corridors.

We didn't discuss the long-ago process, often difficult and lengthy, by which some of us left the ministerial priesthood. Those of us who married—many of us grandparents now—are at peace with our decision. We have encountered our own problems along the way, of course. One man mourns the loss of his wife; another suffered the sorrow of divorce. One, in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, spent the evening smiling and asking us the same questions over and over again.

Likewise, those who remained active priests seem at peace. The reunion was a special moment to recall what bound us to one another—*fratres in unum*—not what divided us. We shared memories of those days of our youth when we had studied, prayed, and played together in the seminary. Although many of us have journeyed along unanticipated paths, the idealism of our early twenties, tempered by experience, has not been extinguished, even now in our seventies.

Before the cocktail hour and an elegant dinner, we gathered around the altar in a small chapel in the basement of the building; there were too few of us for the large worship center upstairs. The "active" priests, vested in white liturgical garb, were interspersed in the semicircle with the "resigned" priests dressed in jackets and ties. As we reached the high point of the Mass, the active priests pronounced the words of consecration aloud; the rest of us, from force of habit and continuing faith, said them in our hearts.

At the kiss of peace, we walked around embracing one another. For many, it was likely the last time. Of the forty men who were ordained in 1959, fifteen have died. One who had planned to attend the reunion

was hospitalized just that morning. Two could not attend because of advanced cancer.

Each year, the number of men celebrating their golden jubilee will continue to dwindle. Only four men were ordained to the priesthood on Long Island last year, and three for Brooklyn, two of them in their fifties. We could speculate as to the reasons for the decline; those of us who left in order to marry know one of them. But our reunion was not a time to debate mandatory celibacy or lament changing demographics. We came together, fifty years on, to celebrate the twin mysteries of *God's* goodness and enduring friendship.