

## INTRODUCTION

As you can see from the front page of your program, they didn't call me Donkey's Ears for nothing!

Those of you from big families, and I'm one of ten; you consider *anything* that distinguishes you from your siblings as a compliment. So I always thought I was handsome.

Now I love all the people whose *names* are in the program. But I know neither they nor you in the congregation would want me to go through it person by person.

I do, however, want you to meet *two people* who colored the whole thrust of their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary so they could be with me today – my brother Anthony and his definitely better half Mary.

The other one I want you to meet is a young man who is my grand-nephew ... from Ireland and working here for the summer. He made his way to Wakefield today, George Kenny.

I've always like Good News-Bad News stories!

Here's the first one I ever told in this parish 14 years ago.

Joe and Mary bought a new car, their first in many years.

On the first weekend they had it, *he* went golfing with his buddies, so *she* got to go shopping in the new car.

Later that day, Joe got home first. He had had a terrible day, - four balls in the water; three out of bounds; a slow group ahead. Nothing went right!

Mary comes home, and immediately he can see there's something wrong.

"What's the matter with you?" says he. "Well," she said, "I have good news and bad news."

"Oh now, don't give me any bad news," says he, "I've just had my worst day golfing in years. Hopeless! I'm ticked! In the pits! What's the good news?"

She looked up at him and said "The airbag works."

I tell you that story for two reasons.

One, I've been called an airbag a few times.

But two, and far more important, I'd like us to laugh together on my last weekend as pastor of this hallowed and revered parish.

August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1965 was the day I left Ireland for America.

It was a spectacularly beautiful day; maybe 70 degrees; not a cloud in the sky.

As we made the trip across the country from Dublin to Shannon, the plane wasn't flying very high because it's a short trip.

Looking out the window, I could see all the fields and the villages and the 40 shades of green that people speak of and write songs about.

As I'm gazing down I see a little Volkswagen plodding along the winding road and can distinctly remember saying to myself: "Lord, if only I could be in that little Volkswagen instead of this big plane."

But the spirit of adventure prevailed.

I had felt the pull we Catholics call 'vocation' to this land and this place, even if I didn't know Rhode Island from Long Island.

So much so that today - 46 years later - I feel the luckiest man in the world, not just for God's call to the priesthood, but for the journey on which the priesthood itself lead me.

Maybe you're like me, maybe you're not, but sometimes in life I have trouble finding God in a conflict or difficulty or question I might be encountering. Never, however, when I look back!

In 1971, it seemed pure accident that I should be appointed chaplain to a hospital, and do that work for almost 20 years. Reflecting on those years now, I see God giving me a vision of Church that I needed, and otherwise wouldn't have had.

I sat with people in their sicknesses, heard their stories, saw all the 'grey' in their lives (5% black; 5% white; 90% grey), - incredibly poor living conditions, bad marriages, abandonment, loneliness, sometimes at-odds with the official church – and yet heroically trying to do their best morally and spiritually with the hand that life had dealt them.

These are the people who kept me in the priesthood.

I saw the gospel *lived*, so that with the passing years, I learned from those experiences that you cannot live the first and greatest commandment to 'Love God with all your heart' if you don't live ... daily ... the second commandment which Jesus said is "like the first," to 'Love your neighbor as yourself'.

All of my assignments over the years have helped me to face that! The Cathedral Parish, St. Mary of the Bay Parish in Warren, St. Joseph Hospital, St. Francis De Sales Parish in North Kingstown – they *all had their impact*, leading to the summit of life's journey as priest for me: this wonderful village of Wakefield, and the incredible people who hang their hats here at St. Francis of Assisi and St. Romuald, call this parish home, and give it its life and energy and love.

I have a few little poems and stories that sometimes serve as 'homilettes' for daily Mass when I'm stuck. This one is called 'Heaven' and it goes like this:

I was shocked, confused, bewildered  
As I entered heaven's door,  
Not by the beauty of it all,  
Nor the lights or its décor.

But it was the folks in Heaven  
Who made me sputter and gasp -  
The thieves, the liars, the sinners,  
The alcoholics and the trash!

There stood the kid from the seventh grade,  
Who swiped my lunch money twice.  
Next to him was my old neighbor  
Who never said anything nice.

Herb, who I always thought  
Was rotting away in hell,  
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine  
Looking incredibly well!

I nudged Jesus, 'What's the deal?  
I would love to hear your take.  
How'd all these sinners get up here?  
God must have made a mistake.'

'And why's everyone so quiet,  
So somber, give me a clue.'  
'Hush, child,' he said, 'they're all in shock.  
No one thought they'd be seeing you.'

Lesson there, right? We try *not to sit in judgment* of anyone in this parish; are just happy that you're here, grey and all! For we know full well we're *all* less than we should be. We all struggle; all have our difficulties! But the Church was and is, and will always be thank God, a hospital for sinners, not a country club for saints.

Now, God knows we've taken a beating in recent years because of the sins of a small number of priests. 'How can that be of God' our enemies say with some delight!  
Well, as I retire – and you never *really* retire from the priesthood – I want you to know I'm prouder than ever to be both priest and Catholic.  
The church has always been a mixture of the divine and the human, the good and the bad; is full of splendor *and* sinfulness.  
And it has been that way since Good Friday. It's *in the mess* that we work out our salvation. That's why we *need* church.

Someone has said that in the new millennium there's going to have to be a massive conversion of people! That person was right!  
But conversion not from unbelief to belief nearly as much as from this me-and-Jesus spirituality that has become so prevalent ... to a sense of belonging and looking out for one another ... the *shared desire* to transform our little acre of God's sin-scarred earth where we live – that's what a parish is - into God's garden where peace and justice and love prevail.

To do that we *have* to be people of hope! I continuously hear people express a hope that isn't Catholic at all; is, in fact, not hope at all!

- They rest their hope in pope, or pastor or priest.
- They hope a document from Rome will somehow rid the church of controversy or debate.
- They hope Latin will return ... or that the altar will be turned around again ... or that the organ will play only Bach.

No! For heaven's sake, no! In Catholic vision, hope is because God is! Everyone and everything have their place, but our hope is in *the Risen Lord*. That's why you're here! That's why *every* Sunday is Easter.

Together you and I make up a church that is wrinkled and scarred; soiled by our sins; not yet fully redeemed. Yet we come here week after week and the priest can look you in the eye and say "Lift up your hearts" because God is *really present*.

In the Eucharist ... of course ... today, the Feast of Corpus Christi!

But God is *also* here because you're here, with your frustrations and your wounded-ness *and* your very divine hope. It's with that hope I leave you.

Today, the world for which I was so carefully prepared in All Hallows Seminary in Dublin is being taken from me *by the grace of God*. That's not death. That's life! New life for the parish! New life even for me!

Just know please that I don't want to be in that little Volkswagen any more. I am exactly where I want to be, and I have you to thank for that.

Thank you for affirming me and blessing me in the countless ways you have, and for saying, in effect, that the airbag works!