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SAYING GOOD-BYE

Leave-takings are part of the texture of human existence. We gesture with a hand waving in the air trying to convey, “I’d like to hold on to you, but I have to let you go.” In the narratives of the New Testament are passages we designate “Farewell Discourses.” Here we find words that speak from the heart to express what moving on is all about. During Holy Week, we listened to Jesus tell His disciples, “I am going to prepare a place for you” (Jn 14:3). Christ had just urged them, “Do not let yourselves be troubled” (1), and later assured them, “I will come back to you” (14: 2,18).

A departure is always the beginning of an absence—often a short one but sometimes it carries a certain finality. A person who has been present to us will no longer be here. Just now in Maine we face a special separation as Bishop Michael Cote moves to Norwich, Connecticut. In today’s world, contact may still continue with telephone, mail, and computer connections. We can hear a voice or see words that speak directly to us. But the fullness of human presence is not there. And we are creatures who long for presence. “I wish you were here.” We measure the miles between Portland and Norwich and say, “Not too far. Still New England.” And that cheers us up.

In the *Acts of the Apostles*, which was composed by Luke, and in the epistles of the early church, we have priceless passages of instruction and exhortation, all based on the movement of Jesus’ followers from one area to another. Without Paul’s many travels, we would not know so clearly what he wanted to say—in the first century to the early Christians and now to us. For Paul, there are many departures. He declares to the elders of Miletus and Ephesus, “Never did I shrink from telling you what was for your own good or from teaching you in public or in private....But now I am on my way to Jerusalem, compelled by the Spirit” (Acts 20: 20, 22).

“On my way.” In our hyper-mobile society, it is a phrase we hear frequently. The Holy Spirit was leading Paul. When we move onward from a place where we have been settled for a while, we ask the Spirit to accompany us. Leaving what is familiar is always a challenge no matter what the transfer is based on. The media have shown us many images of partings these last weeks, as always happens when a country takes on a military engagement. “If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there Your hand shall guide me, and Your right hand hold me fast” (Ps 139:9).

Saying Good-bye in any sphere of human living can be difficult even as we recognize it has to be done. In our prayer lives, too, progress forward involves letting go what we have gotten used to in order to enter new territory. In spiritual striving especially, we cannot settle down in a comfortable locale and decide to stay there. God is always urging us forward, pointing to a higher level of divine union.

When the years add up, we have to move away from earlier experiences as we face the new ones that aging brings. “Good-bye, youth.” Then “Good-bye, middle age. “ This surrender is not all loss. The increasing years open us to greater wisdom, to an expansion of our hearts. And that expansion may lead us to say of a hurtful occasion in our life what an elderly priest said about many such incidents: “Not much malice, but a great lack of understanding.”

We are on a lifelong journey: we say farewell to an earlier day and welcome the new one dawning. Tomorrow will not repeat today. We part with yesterday even as we appreciate what it contained. But we do not let it go entirely. God never says Good-bye to us. The divine presence inhabits every moment I live through. “How weighty are Your designs, O God. How vast the sum of them! Were I to recount them, they would outnumber the sands. Did I reach the end of them, I should still be with You” (Ps 139: 17,18). In every instant of time, God comes to meet me now.

We have been created with the ability to remember. That is how we hold on even as we view personal happenings from a new vantage point. Memory is a storehouse where the pages of your life are contained in a special vault that you have a key for. Looking back helps you to ponder events and perhaps unlock new significance in them. Remembrance brings to life once again what the past holds.

“Do this in memory of Me” are words we hear at every Mass. They are spoken in moments of time but transcend its limitations. Jesus who pronounced these words centuries ago is present to us as His priest repeats them now. Farewells are imposed on us by the conditions of earthly life but we, who have been initiated into the mysteries of Christ, know that ahead lies reunion with everyone we have cherished. The sound of the gates of heaven opening is Welcome! Welcome!

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