

A parish was celebrating its one-hundredth anniversary, and the pastor introduced the oldest parishioner who had been born on the very same day that the church had been established. "I suppose," said the pastor, "you've seen a great many changes here in your lifetime." "Yes," she replied, "and I've been against them all!" I've run into a few of those folks in various parishes through these last 45 years, but mostly not. Most of us have tried to move with the church, finding that the reforms of the Second Vatican Council have improved our sense of church, our importance because of our baptism, and our mission to spread the good news of Jesus Christ Risen from the dead.

And now for 100 years, people in Eastern North Carolina have been coming to the Catholic Church the way you and I came here today. People who fought in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, and the widows of those who never got back. A century of farmers, laborers, mill workers, nurses and housewives, who raised children and cooked meals. Old men and old women with most of their lives behind them; young folks just starting out on a faith journey. Big time founders like Father – then Bishop John Carroll, Judge William Gaston, Bishop John England, Dr. John Carr Monk of Newton Grove, The Tar Heel Apostle, Father Thomas Frederick Price, who along with Father James Walsh, established the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Saint Sister Katherine Drexel, credited with the start of Catholic Schools in our area, First Bishop William Hafey down through our present Bishop Luis Rafael Zarama. Our own local patrons of faith – Fr. Bill Schmidt and Sr. Ann Heathe. People who made a go of it and are remembered still, and people who somehow never left their mark in any way the world noticed and aren't remembered anymore by anybody. Despite all the enormous differences between them, all these men and women entered churches in eastern North Carolina, just the way you and I entered a few minutes ago --because of one thing we all hold in common.

What we have in common is we all believe – or sometimes believed and sometimes didn't – or wanted to believe, or liked to think we believed -- that the universe, that everything there is, didn't come about by chance -- but was created by God. Like us they believed, on their best days anyway, that all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, this God was a God like Jesus, which is to say a God of love, mercy and compassion. That, I think, is the crux of the matter. In 1924 and 2024 and all the years between, that is at the heart of what has made the Catholic diocese of Raleigh. That is what all the festivities of the past year have been about. In the beginning it was not some vast cosmic explosion that made the heavens and the earth. It was a loving God who did. That is our faith and the faith of all the ones who came before us, and please God, all those who will come after us. (help from Frederick Buechner, LISTENING TO YOUR LIFE, p. 176-177)

Being one of those persons who does not believe in the magic of numbers, I still believe that there is a symbolism in them and an occasion like this one, 100 years as a Catholic presence in the buckle of the Bible belt, is an important anniversary, and offers a wonderful opportunity for renewal in commitment, gratitude, and reconciliation. We can ignore the symbolism of this year of course, just as we can ignore a birthday, but then we miss an opportunity for grace. (adapted from Rolheiser). So I am grateful that the diocese has asked us to come together in our parishes this weekend and remind one another of what a gift we have been given in the Catholic Diocese of Raleigh -- by this oh-so-generous God.

And shock of shocks! I have only one point! Let the Church say AMEN! But your homiletical torture will be as long as usual. CAN the Church say AMEN?! Over the past year, as a diocese, we have been remembering. I'd like to turn this concept of remembering like a diamond, looking at four facets of this wonderful diamond of our faith. So let us ponder a bit about how important it is to remember – lest we

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forget! How many walks in the cool of the Garden have we had with God, as mentioned in Genesis 3:8? When did we have our breath taken away at the sight of a newborn baby? When did we feel intimate love? When did we feel we were with a Presence other than ourselves? Yet when we are hurt or fearful we forget those walks with God. The grace of community – of being part of a parish and a diocese – is that not everyone forgets at once! In our individual times of forgetfulness, if we place ourselves in a company of those who remember their walks with God, soon our memory will be restored. And then we can be a reminder for others. (Adapted from Brett C. Hoover and Frank Sabatte, *SoundBYTE Spirituality: sayings to awaken faith*, p. 92) As Catholic Christians living in eastern North Carolina, part of our job is to remind our friends, family and neighbors, that God is still walking with us, still wishes to be with us, and never, ever abandons us. What great good news in a world that is crying out for such goodness.

Facet two. The sharing of memories is part of the definition of what it means to be a human being. Once we have lived long enough to gather a past, we find ourselves saying: “I remember several years ago....” The act of remembering tells us something about ourselves. Our memories are our personal history; they are much of what makes us who we are, they are an instrument which we use to draw a boundary around that fleeting reality called ‘self.’ Memories say “This is what is special about me, this is what is special about my life, this is what is unique to the few years that I am given! Our memories are precious and saving realities.” The great Hasidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, said: “In remembrance lies the secret of redemption.”

But our personal memories are shaped – and shared – and integrated with the memories of others as members of the Body of Christ in the Diocese of Raleigh. We know that, as precious as our own memories are, they are lived out in a larger context, within a community. And in our reality as a diocese, we see that there is something uniquely wonderful about this acre of God’s kingdom that resides in beautiful eastern North Carolina – home to thriving communities and a truly CAPITAL city, sprawling farm and timber lands, gentle rolling hills and the vast and haunting Atlantic Ocean – from the Outer Banks to Sunset Beach. We see how blessed we are when we remember this. We see that our corporate memory is life-giving. It is an effective way to ward off death. We do not go blindly to death. We go asserting again and again that we are unique and important – and part of a community of faith that will continue to remember us in prayer long after we have departed this beautiful part of the world. Our recent celebration of ALL SOULS was a vivid reminder of our connection with those who have gone before us, and who will come after us.

Turn this diamond to facet 3. Remembering is a creative, formative venture – it is not photographic recall. Our past shapes our present, but our present remembering also shapes our past. How we claim it – graciously, with forgiveness and gratitude, or not so graciously, with bitter nostalgia or remorse – is important. All these memories have given the present moment the shape it has now. They are the stuff of EMMANUEL, God-with-us, the places, times, and events once present tense that have changed, challenged, and invited us to experience the simple truth that God meets us here. Not where we think we ought to be. Nor where we once were. Nor where we might some day be. But in our story. Here. As we are. Now. (adapted from Wendy M. Wright, “Memories of Now” in *WEAVINGS*, May/June 1995, p. 12-13)

And finally, facet number 4. We belong to a community even larger than the Church of eastern North Carolina – we belong to a universal, Catholic Church, presided over in charity by our Holy Father Pope Francis. And we are charged by Jesus to remember. “To do this, in memory of me.” (Lk 22:15) The Eucharist which gathers us each Lord’s Day is our ongoing meal of remembering. “This is my body which shall be given up for you; do this in remembrance of me.” (1 Cor 11:24)

Through our faith, we share the same memories, the same history. Our sacred memories unite us as a people. For the people of God, the way of recalling the past is essential for our continued existence as a

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community. The future of the Church is promising because we remember a past of promises: “Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, has eternal life, and I shall raise them up on the last day.” (Jn 6:54) Memories make the future. Only one who can anticipate the wonderful works of the Lord, the MAGNALIA DEI, who remembers them; if they are not already a part of our history, they cannot be seen as a part of our future. We share in the life of the Church, the people of God, if we share its memories. We belong to a chosen people only if we remember that God has chosen us, we live in a promised land only if we remember that God had promised it. To forget this, to view the past in a different way, is to have a different history; it would be to separate ourselves from the Church and its future in the fulfillment of the promises made to us. The cohesion of the people of God perdures in shared historical memories created and sustained by faith.” So may it be for you and for me, the Body of Christ in eastern North Carolina. Let this local Body of Christ say Amen. (John Navone, A THEOLOGY OF FAILURE, p. 80)

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