

GOING HOME....MOVING ON

If you go to Saturday evening Mass and didn't see me outside church last week, it's because I was at St. Bernadette's in Evergreen Park for their 70th anniversary Mass and Dinner. I was looking forward to being there for the celebration, but was even more grateful that I had decided to attend because I was the only former associate who showed up to concelebrate the Mass with Bishop Wypych and Fr. Benedykt Pazdan—the wonderful, energetic, creative pastor.

I say “going home” in the above title because St. Bernadette was my first assignment after ordination in 1977. Back then, we could suggest to the Rector of the seminary and to the Priests Placement Board the type of parish to which we would like to be assigned. I asked for either a city parish or a near-city suburban parish, and Evergreen Park certainly fit the bill. It was a wonderful, vibrant parish with dedicated, hard-working parishioners and an energetic school community with three classrooms for every grade. I helped develop the Youth Ministry program, was given the job of interviewing and hiring a new music director (who went on to become the Director of Music for the Archdiocese of Chicago), became “chaplain” to the young couples group, and I shared in the work of the talented parish liturgy committee. Over the years I ended up marrying several of the graduates of the class of 1978 and presiding at the funerals of people who had become good friends during my time there. So, in many ways, I've always considered St. Bernadette a spiritual “home” because that community helped to shape my life as a priest. And it's always good to go “back home.”

But there is also a “moving on” part to this story, because St. Bernadette's is in many ways like St. Joseph's. Ten, maybe fifteen years ago, the demographics of the area began to change—more seniors, fewer children, fewer Catholics—and both the church and school communities began to shrink. Then, maybe six or seven years ago—I can't remember exactly—the Archdiocese decided that the school was no longer viable and needed to close. It was, of course, a difficult decision to accept and parishioners wondered how long it might be before the church would follow. But thanks to a still wonderful, vibrant (albeit a bit smaller than in 1977) parish community and pastoral staff, St. Bernadette continues to thrive. Physically, the parish buildings have never looked so good, they have an amazing liturgical music program, a talented liturgy committee, and dozens of dedicated parishioners involved in a variety of ministries. Sound familiar?

“Going home” to St. Bernadette last Saturday reminded me that you **can** go home again. Things will always look a bit different, faces will have aged or disappeared, and the names will have changed. But if the Spirit remains vibrant, then there's every reason to believe that “moving on” into a bright future is a promise to believe in.

Fr. Bob