

Why deeper transformation takes a long time

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I've lived in this rectory for almost six years. When I moved in it was freshly painted. Some of the colors are lovely even today. But some were too dark. And the sea foam green in two of the bathrooms reminded me of doctor's offices. So this summer I decided to use some of my vacation time to repaint the rooms.

Five rooms in five days, that's what I did. The sixth day I put everything back in order. When it was all done I felt an immense sense of satisfaction. The look is new and calming.

Now I ask you, when, ever, does a transformation happen like this? With just a few days of work—hard, exhausting work, but still—everything is different. Not only different, but exceedingly, satisfyingly different.

I've worked as a parish priest for 16 years. My hope, always, is to journey with congregations as they encounter and come through their own transformation, becoming the congregation that is most authentic to them. Rarely, ever, has this actually happened. All work, not a lot to show for it, and little satisfaction for the effort.

I suppose that isn't really the point though, feeling satisfied with parish ministry. Or is it?

I entered parish ministry with my new, shiny M.Div. and MSW—emphasis in family systems for congregations, no less—and my optimistic, ordained self. Certainly I thought that journeying with people and whole congregations as they revealed their true strengths would afford some satisfaction. Who wouldn't want to become their most authentic self? (Don't laugh at me! I know I was more than a little naive.)

Yes, seminary taught me that parish ministry is about incremental change, tiny steps forward and giant steps back into homeostasis. Still, I thought that parish ministry is about revealing the inherent strengths of congregations and enabling them to come forth. It means the priest and leaders are talking about the strengths

over and over and over because it takes 11 times hearing something before the general population acknowledges that they've heard it once. Yeah, yeah, I know a lot about the technique of leadership. I've read all the books and taken many continuing ed courses on it and been part of clergy group after clergy group. I did it all so that I could be the best possible parish priest, a wise, insightful, skilled leader.

Parish ministry has taught me a lot about patience, repeating the parish story over and over and over and allowing for years to unfold while only little steps forward take place. Then, when it all gets reviewed, and people have some small amount of satisfaction, hearing that no one credits the female priest with any of the changes and support that have taken place. It's a demanding dynamic to be a parish priest, particularly when female, to hold on to one's sense of purpose even when so very often one is actually diminished by the things others say and how one is treated. It's the reality of women everywhere in every position. Even the female athletes in the Olympics know this reality.

The biggest lesson I've had in parish ministry is what I've learned about me. The lessons have helped me to become a better person and priest, and to understand how I can more effectively guide and support the congregation so that they too might grow.

Unlike painting five rooms in five days and ending up with a whole new look and feel, the transformation God is calling us to be about is not immediate. Transforming ourselves into the best version of who we can be, the person God sees, requires a willingness to do that kind of inner work. It's about gaining self-awareness and other-awareness and being willing to grow in maturity and change. It is sacred work, good work, hard work, but rarely do we see the fullness of our efforts. Those can take a lifetime.

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