



Last week, Fathers Denis, Jim, and I had to attend a meeting in Long Branch, New Jersey that lasted four days. I want to thank Father Ciya for his generosity in taking care of the parish by himself. With several funerals, visits to the sick, and the two daily Masses, he was busy. I joked when I came home that I did not recognize all the changes that he had made in our church. Actually, I was referring to the Christmas decorations having been taken down which was needed to be done. Next week, Father Ciya will go home to visit his family. Unlike the rests of us in our Redemptorist community, Father Ciya only gets to see his family once a year. How blessed our Redemptorist community and parish is to have him here. He is a deeply spiritual man with a million dollar smile.

The meeting we attended is called a provincial chapter, which is held about every two years; the leadership of our Province, along with elected delegates, attends. There were forty-six men attending this session. I smiled when parishioners, in particular Jim Belmonte, who said to me, *Padre, how was your vacation?* Even though we were right on the ocean at the Jersey Shore, the days and evening were rather busy.

The purpose of the chapter, and almost every religious Congregation of men and women have such meetings, is to evaluate our ministries, our personnel, elections particular for leadership offices, evaluation of our financial resources, review health care programs for our senior men, and to plan for the future. It is a very

democratic process and proposals are voted upon by all. The chapter is only in session for a week or so, and then the leadership of the Province, the Provincial, his two consultants, and five other elected direct the province until the next chapter. All of these offices are elected by the priests and brothers of our Province. Although I have great admiration for the structures of the world-wide church and the its many dioceses, I am happy to be a religious since our structures allow us to choose our leaders by the vote of every member. None of these offices are for life as is true for a bishop until he retires.

One of the best parts of the chapter is coming together with so many other confreres. We all know each other in varying degrees. I was with men who had taught me, and with men whom I had taught, with fellows with whom I had been stationed and who had been stationed with me, with classmates from my seminary days, and with fellows with whom I had preached missions and given retreats. There were lots of *remembering when*, funny stories, and great laughter. Like our parish here, we have talented musicians and singers who led us in beautiful prayers services and Masses. It is good to be able to sit and listen to another confrere give an inspiring homily.

And, there were serious discussions, presentations and debates around many issues. Once, our province had six hundred men; now we are 140 confreres. Many of us are over eighty, and there are many men in need of assisted living and skilled nursing care. We had passionate discussions about how to attract vocations, how to reach out to younger people who are drifting from the practice of their faith, dealing with opioed crisis, immigration concerns, pro-life issues, and how we can best use our limited pool of men to serve in ministry.

I have been part of such discussions for more than forty years. I sometimes feel a sense of being overwhelmed by these realities. The temptation for me is to want to blame someone or some group, to long for the days of the past, to judge others with whom I disagree, to fall into apathy and discouragement.

I think of the word *discourage*: it comes from the Latin *to lose heart*. Perhaps, you may have similar feelings about the future of the Church, the decline in attendance, especially among younger people, the bitterness in our politics,

financial troubles, health concerns, family tensions and host of other challenges. I have no simple words for you or for me. I seek to trust in God, and to do what I can do, in my little corner of the world, to be a faithful follower of Jesus with all my sins and faults. Faith does not take away problems, but without knowing that God is Emmanuel, with us in all the moments of life, I would be lost. So, each day is a gift that God gives me and I pray for the grace to be faithful to Him.