

# Twenty Five Years! Wow!

by Fr. Chuck Gallagher  
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Sometimes it seems like we started together just yesterday and at other times it is hard to remember any part of my life before being embraced into Encounter life and love. Your influence has to be so persistent and pervasive that my very identity is wrapped up in you.

Names from those earliest days tumble through my mind and tug at my heart strings, filling me with awe and gratitude as I reflect on how our Father has blessed me with such abundance. Ed & Harriet, Jim & Maddie, Bob & Gerry, Dick & Cindy, Ray & Norma, Joe & Judy, Art & Elsa, Tom & Anne. Each one of those loving couples and hundreds and hundreds more through the years has embraced me into their love for one another and through that changed the whole course of my life and faith.

I learned over these years a completely different vision of the Church. I discovered that it was not enough to know and believe all the right doctrines. They taught me that being generous in doing good things for people was fine as far as it went but there was a whole other dimension. It was a true conversion experience to discover belonging. That I was to find my personal identity in, with, and through those to whom the Lord had called me to belong.

What a difference that has made. I have said for many years that I consider myself the most fortunate and blessed priest on the face of the earth. This span of time has not been easy on priests. So much has changed in the Church. The Church we so joyously offered our lives to in the enthusiasm of our youth has been led by the Spirit to fresh understandings of the Gospel message and a completely different ideal of priestly life. The Body of Christ to which we pledged our service has altered all the ground rules holding out different ideals. This is so exciting and offers so much hope. The Spirit is moving among His people and times of glory are ahead of us. But dramatic change often brings pain. That suffering is not of death but of bringing forth new life. However, there is real pain. Many of my brother priests have experienced great anger, rejection, or worse, indifference. This has often led to discouragement, disillusionment and a sense of failure.

The good Lord has protected me over these years by placing me in your midst. This is none of my doing. It is His gracious gift and your wonderful acceptance of me. You have held me in your arms and protected me with your love. I believe I have been sheltered from the storms and warmed from the chills by your unconditional acceptance of me.

You have opened me to the vision of the new Church with gentle insistence. You have shown me that the issue is not the issue, our relationship is what it is all about. That has been and continues to be such a hard lesson for me to learn. But you live it out so well in your devotion to each other. Often times my breath is taken away when I see you overcome the temptations to lose one another over some disagreement. You are so humble in your dedication to each other. Your example calls me to follow in your footsteps, even though I trip so often.

You keep teaching me by the way you love each other that being "right" can tear you apart. That is such a weakness in me that I need the constant reminder of your example.

The way you externalize your love for each other with photos, mementos, etc, helps me to see that my faith cannot be private, that I need to be brought back to it by little jogs of awareness and open symbols of what I am all about.

You persistently call me to the consciousness that ideas are an important gift of God, but that relationship goes deeper, and that I first have to discover within myself the feelings lying underneath, and then share them with you so that you can know the real me. I am more comfortable with my thoughts and feel vulnerable with my deeper self. You have so tenderly brought me out.

You show me that the answer to misunderstanding and the pain that ensues is not to flee into privacy but to share and embrace when that is the last thing I want to do.

Your love of the Church, even when she doesn't turn her best face toward us has helped me so much. I do love the Church but I want her to be right all the time and to be attractive to me. In other words, I want the Church on my terms. You call me to be her man rather than it being my Church.

This is an age when parenting is carefully measured if not rejected. You have been so generous in bringing forth new life. The sacrifices you make without counting the cost for those who memorialize your love for one another in the flesh disclose to me how often I am impressed with my much lesser sacrifices.

So often my vision of happiness is for everything to go smoothly to have no problems or upsets coming from outside. Your lesson is to turn to one another and face inevitable intrusions with mutual love.

I used to think that the way to be a good priest was to study hard and watch what other priests I admired did. Then I would place myself at your service. That is a fine first step but there is so much more. Now I know that you, the Body of Christ, teach me how to be a priest. I am not your servant but your lover. And you the beloved teach me what that means to you.

TWENTY FIVE YEARS with you has brought me so much fulfillment and joy. No wonder I consider myself the most fortunate of priests. But don't stop now. I'm a slow learner. I have so much further to go.

All my love,  
ENJOY!  
Chuck