

An Extraordinary Priest for an Ordinary Time

by Todd Wiseman, Woodland Park, CO



I found out yesterday that Fr. Don Dilg passed away. Many reading these words may not even know who Fr. Don was, but he was for me, and for many, the simple parish priest at Our Lady of the Woods and Teller County in Colorado from 2004 until 2010.

But my family didn't get to know him until the summer of 2008 when we first moved to Woodland Park. Some may find our late arrival and relatively limited exposure of just a few years to this kind priest a disadvantage in telling his story, and they are probably right.

But my story is my own, and for me, our time came while we were still a young Catholic family, but growing quickly. My oldest child, now in college the oldest of nine, would have been only three the first time she wandered past the tiny narthex and into the still small church that was our parish in those days.

Even though we only lived three minutes from the parish, we never seemed to arrive more than one minute early - a habit forgivable only by the fact that every one of our kids was incapable of tying their shoes or doing much else.

All these years later, not a single homily of Fathers stands out in my mind. But what I remember quite clearly is a priest of immense intelligence, thoughtfulness and care. He would slowly approach the lectern each Sunday and after a pause longer than a visitor might expect, would systematically lay out the basic truths on the Christian life in ways that were deep, approachable and practical.

I swear this man's IQ was at least 20 points higher than my own.

He was tall too. Unusually tall for any man, and he would show a toothy smile as he looked down on me and most of the people who had the honor of knowing him.

How this wonderful priest, and a religious of the Holy Cross order, even ended up in our small Colorado mountain town was another happy accident most likely related to the advertising empire of a different man from Chicago from another era, but that is another story. The point is he was our priest and the parish was better for it.

After leaving Our Lady of the Woods, he spent the next few years as the Assistant Superior at Holy Cross Novitiate in Cascade, Colorado. I saw him a few times as I was driving up the pass. He was known then to go get the mail most days by walking on the busy highway rather than getting in his car.

When he returned to our parish, which he did occasionally, I would be reminded of a man who was already missed by me and others, a sentiment rare among men.

Father Don served as my priest in what seemed like simpler times. He left just before the advent of smartphones and their 24/7 distractions. The world seemed less political, less opinionated and just kinder back then. And while some of the negative things of our day likely existed back then too to some degree, Fr. Don was the type of priest that seemed to transcend the up and down noises of the day making me a better Catholic and a better man.

For me and anybody that knew Fr. Don, we were luckier than most, and for that and his memory I am changed and grateful.