

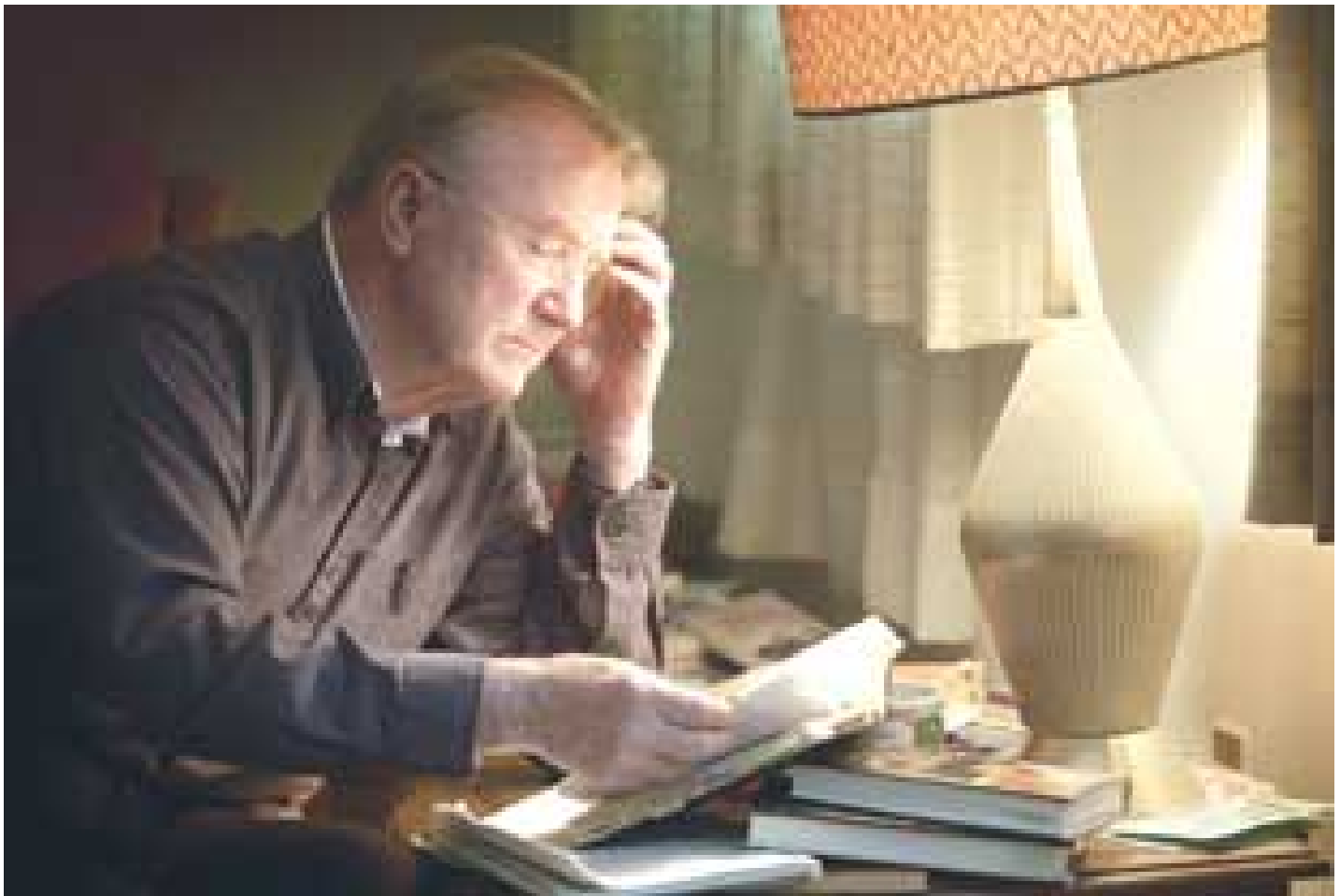
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After 50 years, priest's love for church continues to grow

LINDA HALSTEAD-ACHARYA Of The Gazette Staff May 24, 2004

\$3 FOR FIRST 13 WEEKS



The Rev. Charlie Gorman reads from his dog-eared Bible in his home next to the St. Mary's Catholic Church in Columbus. He is celebrating his 50th year in the priesthood.

JAMES WOODCOCK/Gazette Staff

After 50 years in the priesthood, the Rev. Charlie Gorman, 75, of Columbus, says his "love life" is more active than ever.

"My 'love life' continues to grow," he said with a smile and an Irish lilt.

Of course, Gorman is referring to his love of God and his fellow man.

Gorman's sense of humor, his radiant warmth - and his trademark icebreaker, "How's your love life?" - are familiar to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, from Great Falls to Circle and beyond. On Friday, Gorman's 50-year anniversary will be celebrated with a special Mass at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Columbus.

Over the past half-century, Gorman has served as parish priest in roughly a dozen Montana communities large and small.

Each one, he said, reflects its own unique culture. At the same time, each are bound by their common belief in God, something he refers to as "a unity in diversity."

Born the youngest of 12 children in Ballinakill, Ireland, Gorman lost his father at age 6. His mother passed on to her children a firm belief in the need for God and a concern for people, expressed through action.

"God was part of our everyday life," Gorman said. "Our needs were few and our wants were ignored."

Gorman remembers his mother insisting that the entire family be present for nightly prayer.

"We all knelt on the kitchen floor together and prayed the rosary," he said. "It had to be done."

Even before high school - he was one of only two siblings to complete a secondary education - he knew he wanted to be a priest. He enrolled in a seminary in Ireland and was ordained in 1954. In September of that same year, he was sent to serve in Great Falls.

"I knew nothing about Montana," he said. He was placed with an Irish priest who came from Laois (a Gaelic word pronounced "leesh"), Gorman's own home county. The connection helped ease his introduction to Montana and parish life.

"People call it coincidence," he said. "I see God's hand in everything."

When Gorman landed in the Big Sky state, he was taken by its vastness. When he wrote back home, describing its enormity, "they thought I was lying," he said.

Gorman spent only a few months in Great Falls before embarking on a career that took him from Fromberg, Bridger and Joliet to Pompeys Pillar, Custer and Hysham. Then it was back to Great Falls, on to Billings, Circle, back to Billings, Laurel - several parishes and a circuit-riding stint in Alaska - and now to Absarokee and Columbus. In between, he spent one year in sabbatical at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash. He also worked at the campus Newman Center in Billings and was instrumental in establishing the Sacred Heart Renewal Center in Billings.

"All of those things were good for me," he said. "There's growth in moving on."

As he moved from town to town, from era to era, Gorman's life was shaped by the local people and global changes.

Vatican II - and the subsequent changes that took place in the mid-1960s - had the most profound impact, he said. But it also represented a difficult time for the Catholic Church, which lost many followers.

"You can try to stop change, you can ignore it or you can jump in and go with things," he said.

It is evident he has chosen the latter. For Gorman, Vatican II was a liberating experience.

"People were free to think again," he said.

As times shifted, Gorman found purpose in illuminating new perspectives. He particularly enjoyed introducing older followers - followers who had been brought up believing in a God of guilt and fear - to a God of love.

Gorman also credits the Cursillo movement for bringing a profound change to Catholics and those of other denominations. The Cursillo is a weekend "retreat" experience that guides participants in developing a deeper understanding of God.

"I have seen it bring a whole new life to (participants), a whole new way of seeing God," he said. "Goodness has no religion. It's a unique experience. and it touches everybody just a little differently."

Other changes have not been so heartening. Since Gorman entered the priesthood, divorce has escalated exponentially.

Gorman has also witnessed rising materialism erode people's need for God and fellow man.

"When you live in poverty, you need each other," he said. "When you have material things, you can buy your sins."

More recently, he has sustained his faith through the abuse scandals that have wracked the church.

"The priesthood, we were under the gun for the last few years," he said. Gorman likens that situation to today's headlines on prisoner abuse in Iraq, which he considers a distortion magnifying the actions of a few.

He has also watched as the number of young men entering the priesthood plummets. This coming year, only eight priests will be ordained in all of Ireland, he said, down from "maybe 200" the year he was ordained.

When asked about the future, he sees change for the church.

"Nothing has ever stood still," he said. "Is the church keeping up with the other understandings of God? It depends who you talk to. If you were running a business and thousands of your people left, you probably would look at the product."

One of the "products" he would look at is the priesthood.

"Maybe it's time to end the celibate priesthood," he said.

These days, Gorman divides his time between three of his favorite places: Montana, Ireland and Alaska. For most of the year, he serves as parish priest for Columbus and Absarokee. Every spring he returns to his native homeland. In between, he tries to squeeze in a trip to Alaska, where his love of fishing lured him years ago and where he fills in for vacationing priests.

This year, he has stuck around a bit longer than usual, awaiting the upcoming celebration.

"It went too fast," he said, reflecting on the 50 years since he was ordained. "Like St. Paul, I can say I have not yet reached the finish line, but I'm working toward it. I'm still loving God more than ever and wanting to love people more than ever."

If you go

A Mass celebrating the Rev. Charlie Gorman's 50 years in the priesthood will be at 7 p.m. Friday at St. Mary's Catholic Church, 240 N. Fourth St., Columbus. Bishop Anthony Milone of the Great Falls/Billings Diocese will preside. Weather permitting, the Mass will be held outdoors. A reception will follow.