

Rotheiser: The passing of a Good Shepherd

No community should botch its deaths. Last month a wonderful leader within the faith community in Canada died and it could profit us all to more fully receive his spirit.

How do we do that? It can be helpful for us, I believe, to highlight those places where his life, his energy, and his leadership more particularly helped steady us in our faith and helped us to use our own gifts more fully to serve God.

Who was this man? *Joseph Neil MacNeil*, Emeritus Archbishop of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

I was lucky enough to have had him as my bishop for the first eighteen years of my priesthood. He was a good mentor and I needed one.

I had just finished seminary and, not unlike many a naïve young man just turned loose in ministry, I had overly-rigid views on what was wrong with the world and how to fix that, views rooted more in personal immaturity than in prudence, views in need of a lot of leveling out. He was a guiding hand, not just for me but for many others.

And this was a time as well where the church as a whole was struggling for a deeper maturity.

The church was just engaging the reforms of Vatican II, wondering whether it was going too far or not far enough, and reeling at the same time from the radical cultural and sexual changes of the late 1960s.

Change was everywhere. Nothing, church-wise or otherwise, was as before. We were a pioneer generation ecclesially in need of new leadership.

He led us well, nothing too daring, nothing reactionary, just good, steady, charitable leadership that helped us, among other things, be more pastorally sensitive, more ecumenical, less self-absorbed, less clerical, more open to lay involvement, and more sensitive to the place of women.

He kept things steady but inching forward, even while properly honoring the past.

Among his many gifts, *three* qualities of his leadership, for me, particularly stand out as a challenge for us all to live out our own discipleship more deeply.

First, he could live with ambiguity and not panic when tension seemed everywhere. He was not frightened or put off by polarization and criticism. He sorted them through with patience and charity.

That helped create space for a more-inclusive church, one within which people of different temperaments and ecclesiologies could still be within the same community. He kept his eyes on the big picture and not on the various side-shows, skirmishes that so easily deflect attention away from what's important.

Good people carry tension so as to not let it spill over unnecessarily onto others.

Good leaders put up with ambiguity so as to not resolve tensions prematurely. He was a good person and a good leader. He could be patient with unresolved tension.

Second, he understood the innate tension that comes from our baptism wherein we are perennially torn between two loyalties, that is, the tension between being loyal to the church and its dogmas and rules on the one hand, and being loyal at the same time to the fact that we are also meant to be universal instruments of salvation who radiate God's compassion to everyone within all the churches and within the world at large.

Here's one example of that: In the face of a very messy and painful pastoral situation, I once phoned him asking him what I should do.

His answer properly interfaced law and mercy: "Father, you know the mind of the church, you know canon law, you know my mind, and so you know what ideally should be done here ... but you also know the principle of *Epikēia*, you are standing before the pain of these people, and God has put you there. You need to bring all of this together and make a decision based on that. Tell me afterwards what you decide and then I'll tell you whether I agree or not."

I did make a decision, phoned him afterwards, he didn't agree with me, but he thanked me for doing what I did.

Finally, as a faith leader he understood the difference between catechesis and theology and he honored and defended the special place of each of them. Catechesis is needed to ground us; theology is needed to stretch us. He understood that.

As a former President of a University who had done graduate work at the University of Chicago, he wasn't threatened by theologians and generally came to our defense when we were attacked.

One of his pet sayings when one of his theological faculty came under scrutiny or attack was simply: "They're theologians! They speculate. That's what theologians do. They aren't catechists."

He offered an equal defense for his catechists.

In church parlance, a bishop, an archbishop, a cardinal, or a pope is considered *A Prince of the Church*.

He was that, a Prince of the Church ... not because the church anointed him as such, but because he had the intelligence, grace, and heart of a leader.