

April 10, 2016

Farewell, Father Henry

As we enter into this season of new life, we wish farewell to a friend, Father Henry Hildebrandt, who has been born into a new life in Heaven.

I imagine that God probably needed Father Henry for some high-tech advice. Perhaps He has a new computer. You know how confusing those things can be. And the older you are, the more difficult new technology can be to understand.

You can see an example of Father Henry's handiwork at Sacred Heart School in Ness City, where he was pastor. Several years ago—at a time when I barely knew how to turn on my computer—Father Henry had ... well, he sort of ... um ... (I'm having trouble because I'm technically illiterate) connected the classrooms through an inter-television, I-talk, you-talk thingy. And he

Well, rather than try to explain everything he did, I'll just say that I wouldn't have been surprised if one day the entire school lifted up and flew off to Paris for a field trip to the Louvre, Father Henry smiling broadly as he steered the school high above the ocean, his hands on a giant, old wooden steering wheel that he bought on eBay.

When Bishop John was consecrated on Feb. 2, 2011, Father Henry oversaw the digital video-taping of the event. As he filmed, he managed two additional, strategically-placed camera operators, whispering orders through a mic. I still find this hard to believe, but Father Henry edited the presentation *as he went*. By the time those gathered left the reception, dozens of completed DVDs were already available.

(It's easier for me to believe that he used some sort of time machine. I bet that he had the DVDs made before the ordination even took place. That would be just like Father Henry.)

Noting Father Henry's busy schedule, Bishop John later asked *me* to become adept at the filming process, as well. I gave him the same look a child might give after being asked to split an atom. I explained to the bishop my theory: "I could never hope to have Father Henry's success unless I could have access to his time machine," I explained.

Bishop John asked if I was still taking my medication.

Father Henry was known to dress up as a biblical character when providing educational sessions at various functions. (See Page 6.) I once asked him if I could help out, but he insisted that Batman was not a biblical character. I'm still checking up on that. (Wait ... that was Samson, not Batman. Dang.)

He was an excellent teacher (Father Henry, not Samson. Nor Batman). I always enjoyed attending his sessions, even when he was in the interesting and pleasantly eccentric guise of Father Henry Hildebrandt.

About a month ago, I called Father Henry, hoping to get a few quotes to go with a story I was writing about him being chosen by Pope Francis to be a Missionary of Mercy. I researched the backstory online. All I needed was a couple of quotes. I was so busy. I had a super heavy schedule. Seriously, I was like, really, really bogged down. I was glad the story wouldn't take up a lot of time.

So, I call Father Henry, and he's like, "Well, I really think I need to come down and talk to you in person. There's much more to this than you can communicate over the phone. Why don't we have lunch?"

Oh, c'mon, man! All I need is a few quotes! Just a couple paragraphs! Don't you understand how busy a big newspaper editor like me is?

I hung up the phone, clicked off the Solitaire game, and jotted down some questions. I reluctantly met Father Henry the next day. We went to Wendy's and each had a bowl of chili.

Prior to the interview, I had been afraid of having what psychiatrists' term MECASQ, or "Moments of Embarrassment Caused by Asking Stupid Questions." This is an anomaly I've had since I started my career.

This was challenged even more so (as Bishop Gilmore explained at Father Henry's funeral) by Father Henry's way of staring quietly for a moment after having been asked a question. Bishop Gilmore explained that this was Father Henry's way of "deep listening", of "processing all that had been said, both by the speaker, and by his God at the same time." I always assumed he was in stunned wonder at the utter stupidity of my questions.

I needn't have worried. For the next 90 minutes, I sat mesmerized as Father Henry shared a very personal story of his experience in Rome, and what being a Missionary of Mercy meant to him.

Our lunch affected me on a deeply spiritual level (which I told him when I saw him later at the Christ Mass). It was difficult for me to see our lunch end.

I wrote the story, and, with a few changes, he approved. I'm so glad to know he was alive to see the page devoted to his new mission, and how much it meant to the diocese.

Father Henry had a brief time to be the Missionary of Mercy Pope Francis chose him to be before being called home. My prayer is that our diocese will long take to heart the message Father Henry received, that **"every baptized Catholic be a missionary of mercy, sharing the love and goodness of God with every person they meet."**

