



MORE PEOPLE ARE LISTENING THAN WE KNOW

As I walked up the stairs from the field to the parking lot, I had made my decision.

It had been a long day. My knee was killing me.

It was the kind of day that began with several trips to the area's hospital for emergency calls and continued with funerals, long lines for confessions and a Saturday evening Mass when the homily had not landed as I had hoped, interrupted by quiet coughs of boredom.

I hadn't had a day off in weeks, and the weight of it all was heavy. Living alone and serving three churches, two parishes, the high school and the local hospital — there was no one to share the burden except my trusted dog, and he could do little but listen.

The night was surprisingly warm, the sky forgiving.

Hurrying up the stairs from the athletic field, I could hear the quiet roar of the crowd behind me — proud families and young people who had just graduated. Basking in the joy of their accomplishment, I made my way toward my car.

I was proud of the kids, having served as their chaplain over the years. But I was tired.

Earlier that night, during the graduation ceremony, the decision became clear.

It was not an easy one. Sitting patiently on the field as names were read and speeches delivered, I was deep in discernment, weighing whether the

demands of time meant I must bow out as school chaplain.

It was not the school that challenged me. Nor the kids.

Rather, it was the weight of everything together — the ever-growing parish, the hospital, the nursing homes, the funerals and the constant pastoral needs.

Some had offered advice.

"Father, you need to slow down."

Fellow priests would say, "It's important that you take your day off."

But sometimes those words fall flat in a way only caregivers and overwhelmed parents understand. Sometimes there is simply no one else to help.

Sometimes what arrives on your day off is the fourth funeral of the week, unable to be shared or ignored, much like an emergency call or urgent pastoral situation.

That night, sitting on the field and sharing in the joy of the young people, I made my decision to step away as the school's chaplain.

It was not an easy one. I was stretched too thin.

I had given it my all over the past eight years. It was time to recognize my limits.

After the young people turned their tassels and processed from the field, I made my exit. I did not linger long, offering only a parting wave here and there. The students were with their families — moms, dads and proud grandparents — while the faculty milled about.

I made my way from the crowd up the stairs toward my car, confident in my decision.

I didn't look back. I couldn't bear to. I was leaving something behind — a passion for education and a lifelong love of evangelizing young people.

I was almost to the top of the stairs when I heard the breathless shout of a young man behind me.

"Father Andrew! Father Andrew!"

I turned and looked down the stairs to find a graduate looking up at me, struggling to catch his breath.

He was a student I recognized, but not someone I had gotten to know over the past four years.

A familiar face whose story I did not know.

I smiled and replied, "Hey, congratulations."

He paused, looked up at me and said, "Father Andrew, my family is not religious. I didn't grow up with faith. But I wanted you to know that for the past four years I have been listening. I have been listening to everything you have said. Thank you."

With that, the young man ran back down to his family and friends on the field.

Suddenly, the weight of exhaustion and the stress of life in the parish lifted, as did my determination to step back from high school chaplaincy.

I turned and quietly walked up the remaining stairs, wiping tears from my eyes.

When I reached my car, I sat down, shut the door and sat in silence.

In that quiet moment, I realized something simple: God had spoken clearly, and both of His servants had been listening.

Sometimes there are no more hours to add to the day. No secret reserve of priestly cavalry waiting on the horizon.

Only a renewed determination, by the grace of God, to get up and fight another day.

And sometimes, more people are listening than we ever know. ■

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