Columns
Religious Life



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Don't tell my community, but I'm getting old! And it's OK.

Let's back up a bit. I'm a fan of American football. One of the first photos of me is with my dad watching the late Hall of Fame quarterback Bart Starr on TV. To be honest, Dad and I were sound asleep. I had the privilege of attending several professional football games with my dad. We used to arrive at the stadium early so we could watch the players and coaches arrive and then watch the warmups, an amazing display of athletic ability neither Dad nor I possessed. I understand the game and enjoy the strategy. To this day, autumn Sunday afternoons are reserved for watching football games.

At the risk of stating the obvious, professional athletes, like professional entertainers and many corporate leaders, are grossly overpaid. Some use their fame and fortune for humanitarian causes, often funding worthwhile projects, and they should be commended for that. Others, however, use their fame and fortune to — for lack of a better description — get their own way. This reality came to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five high-profile football players, some nearing the end of their careers, started making demands; basically, they want to control everything — for their benefit. There was no thought about their teams.

Watching the drama play out angered and frustrated me: So many life-and-death global issues and these grown men are acting like spoiled brats. They are seen as role models; in my opinion they are models of who/what not to be. What gave them the right to control who should be members of the teams with them, or not; how much money they should get paid; who would replace them and when? As I fussed about the athlete's "demands," I had no idea what was coming my way.

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As happens often in schools, the new school year brings significant changes. The school where I minister has a new academic leadership team. I moved from teaching math to teaching theology again, with all new classes. My double-size updated classroom was replaced with a standard size one, and chalkboards are back. Having just gotten used to a smart board, the return to chalk seems especially rude.

The next piece of news was a little tougher to hear and embrace. It was determined that I would begin training my replacement for the academic programming role. The programming role was a two-person position for years. Changing enrollment, budget constraints and improved technology allowed the role to be streamlined, and I took on the task alone when the other programmer retired.

From an institutional standpoint, it's never good for anyone to be "the only" one who knows something. Although I would have preferred a discussion over the "announcement," I was, and remain, very much at peace about the change "forced" upon me. That being said, I'm not a big fan of transition.

I share files and templates and am staying out of the way of the new programmer. I've offered support but have been very clear that she needs to seek me out. I am her backup and resource person as we work through many "firsts" and she continues to learn the job. But it's working, and I enjoy having to do less programming to compete with my role as teacher.

My reactions to the ministry changes seem the complete opposite of the football players'. I'm not demanding a trade or threatening to "sit out." Unlike the athletes, I didn’t stomp my feet to get my own way. I was happy to shift around for the good of our students and the institution, even though it would be a lot of work for me and it was not something I chose. Consciously or not, the school seems to be planning for a time when I will no longer be there. That may sound harsh, but it is a reality as we all continue to age.

The change in ministry duties came at the same time as I noticed some other things. I really am getting old.

Because of a twisted leg, I've got a fussy knee. When I was a teenager, my doctor advised me that the knee, and possibly my hip, would give me trouble as I aged. I haven't given that a thought in years. But sure enough, both are starting to act up on occasion, and when they do, I become conscious of my place of residence. Part of my rental agreement includes me doing the yard work and it's sometimes difficult or painful to mow the lawn or remove the snow.

The masks we've worn these many months muffle sound. High school students are notorious for mumbling. In our classrooms, fans constantly hum as they circulate the air — part of the continuing COVID-19 protocol. I find myself asking students to repeat themselves or use their "outside voices" so everyone can hear. It's a clear

sign that my hearing is not as sharp as it once was. My latest eye exam showed the need for trifocals, another reminder that I'm getting older.

Some of the new teachers at our school community were born in this century. I am now the only sister on staff; at our peak there were 50-plus of us ministering at the school. Some of my new students this year are the children of my former students. My nieces and nephew are all on their own now; one even purchased the home her mom and I grew up in.

At 57 (my birthday is this week), I am among the youngest in my province of the community. I bristle when I'm referred to as a " young sister" because outside my community I'm not young. High school and college classmates and family and friends are beginning to retire, albeit a little before the "usual" age of 65. The thought of retirement has not even entered my consciousness yet. Don’t get me wrong: I've got a lot of life left in me – God willing. But I am getting older. I can still do everything I used to do, but I do notice I'm slowing a bit.

Francis of Assisi's deathbed prayer comes to mind: "I have done what is mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours." As far as I know I am not on my deathbed, but if we go back to where I started, I'm now officially old. And I'm embracing that reality 100%. I wouldn't trade it for anything. For those who come after me: I have done what I can, I am sharing what I can, and I'm letting you run with things now.