

Friday of this week will mark my 80th birthday. It is the kind of milestone that makes a person think about their life, about the people and events that have really mattered in it as well as about things that might have been different. As I began to do so, I was surprised to see how many of the feelings and thoughts that came spontaneously to me had to do with gratitude.

The basic gift that we have all received is the gift of life. It is a gift we owe to our parents but even more to God. Our faith teaches us that everything ultimately comes from and depends on God. Life is his gift. Nor is it something that he gives once and for all. He remains, in mysterious ways, present in all aspects of our life, including in the gifts we are and give to one another.

Although my family, like most families, was far from perfect, my parents were able to create an environment that was stable and supportive, faith-filled and loving, an environment that enriched me and my two brothers in many ways.

In addition to family I have been blessed repeatedly in the course of my life by the gift of friendship. I can't begin to suggest the many ways in which friends have been for me a source of strength and encouragement as well as of love and understanding.

The thought of becoming a priest was something that came to me at a very early age. We lived close to the parish church where my mother was the organist, and I and my brothers regularly served the early morning Mass. Attendance at a Catholic school at both the primary and secondary levels nourished my faith and encouraged the thought of a possible priestly vocation.

I entered the diocesan seminary in Toronto at the age of 17 and began an undergraduate program at St Michael's College in the University of Toronto. This was followed by four years of theology at Laval University in Quebec City, culminating in ordination to the priesthood in 1962. After a year in a Toronto parish, I continued my education in Scripture and theology in Rome and in Münster, Germany. My two years in Rome coincided with the Second Vatican Council. For a young priest still very much in the process of intellectual and spiritual formation, it was an exciting and challenging time.

What began in Rome continued and was deepened by my studies in Germany. There I was taught by some of the major Catholic theologians of the 20th century including Joseph Ratzinger, the future Benedict XVI, Walter Kasper, later an influential cardinal in Rome, and the great German Jesuit, Karl Rahner.

Looking back at the wonderful opportunities given me at every step of my educational journey, I marvel at how fortunate I was. It gave me a breadth and depth of understanding of the church and of the world that have stood me in good stead throughout the years.

Although I am a diocesan priest, my life has been mostly spent, not in a parish, but in the classroom. I have taught and worked with theological students at various levels as well as, more recently, undergraduates. Although teaching can be challenging, it can also be extremely rewarding. I have always felt that I learned more from my teaching than my students.

St Michael's College has been in many ways the context and the focus of my adult life. It is a place where I have both taught and lived for the past 46 years. It was also for St Michael's that I have put together and donated a fairly substantial collection of contemporary Canadian art. My love for and interest in art was initially sparked by the exposure I had to so much wonderful art of various kinds during the four years I was studying in Europe.

In 1980, I began a practice that has continued for more than 35 years of spending at least some time most Saturday afternoons visiting Toronto art

galleries. In the course of doing so I built up the collection which is now installed in various buildings on the St Michael's campus.

I am grateful for all that I have learned over the years from conversations with artists and art dealers and for the opportunity the collection has given me to introduce many students and others to a world of art, which, although rarely religious, is often deeply spiritual.

With the passing of time, the Eucharist has become increasingly important for me. Many of the key elements of Christian life come together in it and are reinforced by it - our sense of church as a community of faith and prayer, the centrality for us of the person, life, and especially death and resurrection of Jesus, the gift of the Scriptures, the life-transforming meaning of communion.

At the heart of the Mass is a great prayer in which we praise and thank God for all his gifts including, in a special way, the gift of Jesus, whose death and resurrection we remember and celebrate and whose power for life is rendered present among us. If my mind and heart at this moment are filled with thoughts and feelings of gratitude, it is, at least in part, because of my regular celebration of the Eucharist. By offering thanks we learn to recognize just how much of life and how much in life comes to us as a gift.