

Column072819
Companions on the Journey

July 28, 2019

Dear Friends,

Last May a longtime parishioner died after a series of illnesses. She had not lived in the parish for several years but had been in a variety of different Nursing Home and Retirement situations. Over the years she had asked that she be allowed to be buried from Saint Anthony's and we always try to honor such requests. She had been a widow for over twenty-five years and her only other relative was an adopted child with whom there had not been contact for many years.

One of our local Funeral Directors was asked by the woman's Financial Assistant to make arrangements with us and was assured that there were adequate funds for her funeral. In the course of making arrangements the Funeral Director learned that the deceased had said she had a will and that she had entrusted it to me. This was news to me. I had no memory of such a will and looked in the parish files but was unable to find anything there.

Her death was right around the time that we were making the transition from the old Rectory into the new Rectory. I had to go through all of my possessions and all my official papers as pastor and separate them into what was moving to the new Rectory and what was moving into my new office in the Pastoral Center. In the course of doing this assessment I came across my own strongbox with my personal papers—will, Advanced Directive, Cemetery Plot deed, etc. I was just going to label it to be moved to the new Rectory when I opened it and looked inside. There, to my surprise, was the woman's will. I had no idea I had such a document.

I opened the envelope. There was a single sheet of paper inside torn out of a copybook. Written on the lined pages was her last will and testament. It was written in ballpoint pen ink and consisted of three things:

- 1) I leave all my possessions to c/o Saint Anthony parish Father Stephen McHenry
- 2) I direct that all my bills be paid off from my estate.
- 3) I direct that no one is to contest this will.

Then the will had been notarized and witnessed by two different people, signed and dated. It had been given to me in April 1994 almost twenty-five years ago. I forwarded the will to the attorney for the estate and after some weeks he indicated that the will I had, even though twenty-five years old, was the only surviving will and it had been lawfully promulgated even though hand-written.

The attorney said that in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania there is a 15% inheritance tax that would need to be paid from the estate. I mentioned that parishes are tax exempt. He said; "She didn't leave it to the parish; she left it to you." I said: "No she didn't. I read it." He said: "Go back and read it again." "I leave any and all proceeds of my estate to Rev. Stephen McHenry, Pastor." Is what it says. "Now, right after the word TO she drew a line and on the line above your name she wrote c/o Saint Anthony Parish." "But she meant to leave it to the parish. She could not possibly have meant to leave her whole estate to me. I was still the new pastor here for about two years when she gave me the will. She had known Msgr. Sullivan and Saint Anthony's for over twenty years. I am sure she was leaving it to the parish."

"Well, you may be right, Father but as the Attorney of Record I have to give my account of how I read the will and your name is the name on the same line. Whatever her intent, the words say it is for you. And that is what I have to say to the Commonweal when I file the claim" "What would it take to have the alternate reading accepted?" "Well, I can file an appeal for an alternate reading of the will naming the parish as the recipient but the State Attorney General's Office has to sign off on that. It will cost some money to file such an appeal but if that is what you want I will do it. But just a heads up, Father. The Commonwealth may not go along because if the money goes to you they get their fifteen percent. If it goes to the parish they get nothing. And it's their call. But I'll put everything in motion."

I thanked him.

In the middle of June we received word of the verdict that the State of Pennsylvania had accepted the alternate reading and there was a check to the parish, the last installment, bringing the total estate to \$110,000. That is a great blessing upon our parish. It was especially important this past year because we were very strapped for cash much of the year and were actually only able to pay all our bills by using about \$70,000 of those dollars.

Now here's the thing. The Lord knew that will existed back in 1994 way before our fire and our new church and the closing of our school and the Child Care Center. The Lord knew this would be a lean year for our parish and we would definitely have finished in the red without this great gift. The Lord prompted her to act and then everything lay dormant for 25 years. Then suddenly there is the 30, 60 and 100fold.

The woman's name is Teresa Fullerton. Please pray for her and her generosity. And if any of you want to remember Saint Anthony's in your will please do so. I have already done so in my own will. I didn't leave everything to Saint Anthony's but a portion but I remembered the Seminary and some other charities too. AND—isn't that a great story?!

Peace,

Msgr. McHenry