



Priestly ministry is like a game of golf

» Father Ron Hutchinson, is director of priestly vocations for the Diocese of Grand Rapids.

It may sound like a cliché, but like many other priests I attempt to play the game of golf. And when I say attempt, I mean attempt. I only took up the game eight years ago and for six of those years I never picked up a club. However, this year I joined my Knights of Columbus council's golf league. My intent was to give myself a weekly opportunity to pull away from the endless mountains of work, meetings, etc. and get outside for some fresh air and exercise. I never guessed my weekly foray on the golf course would provide opportunities to see how my priestly ministry is like a game of golf.

I promised when I began playing this year I was going to enjoy my time on the course each week. However, after playing two holes on my first night I found myself becoming frustrated, fed up, and downright disgusted by how poorly I was playing. Instead of giving me inspiration, this only made my golf game more abysmal than normal. It was my golf partner who helped me snap out of it. He reminded me I was there to have fun. This reminder gave me just what I needed to refocus and helped make the rest of the evening more enjoyable (even though my game didn't improve). I started finding the strokes to celebrate rather than focusing on what wasn't going well. It's funny, but that is exactly what I have to remind myself of at the parish. It is easy to see the negatives and become obsessed about what isn't going well. But when I start celebrating each and every positive moment, I stop being singularly focused on moments that disappoint, frustrate, and drag me down.

One of the reasons my golf game is not PGA level play is because I lift my head when I swing my club. In other words, I don't keep my eye on the ball. As in the game of golf, the priest has to stay focused on what is really important. It is easy to get distracted by seemingly important issues or matters and not find time for what is really important – namely prayer. Although the ministry of the priest is important, if it does not flow from his prayer life it will become only work. What we do as priests must flow from who we are or we are just doing a job. And

Catholic Diocese of
Grand Rapids
online vocational
resources:

Priestly vocations

dioceseofgrandrapids.org/vocation/welcome.htm

Religious orders

dioceseofgrandrapids.org/clergy/religiousorders.htm



yet, prayer is often sacrificed in order to attend to everything we as priests have piled up in our “inboxes.” Like all the guys on the golf course, my spiritual director is always reminding me to keep my focus.

Trying to get that little white ball into that cup on the green requires just the right touch and the discipline of knowing how hard to hit the ball. Plain and simple, in order to get better it takes practice and the willingness to be a student of the game. Despite wanting to do my best in my ministry as a priest, it too is something that takes practice. I know I am not perfect and God is still working on me. Therefore, I sometimes make mistakes. Like a bad putt, my best mistakes are the ones I learn from. As a disciple I know I must always be willing to learn in order to become more like Jesus – the great high priest who has called me to service in the church.

I've noticed what I enjoy the most about being in the golf league are the opportunities to get to know the men of my parish in very meaningful ways. (It may not come as a surprise, but a game of golf reveals the real man behind the clubs.) So often I only see people on Sunday or in meetings, but the opportunity to be out playing a round of golf has opened up new ways for me to become more familiar with some of the parishioners I serve. In addition, it has given me male camaraderie in a way I have not experienced since seminary. Although I have priest friends I spend time with on occasion, having a standing “appointment” for recreation with other men has become a real blessing in my life.

Yes, priestly ministry is like a game of golf, but it is certainly much more rewarding!