Lobster is *fresh* when you grow up in New England.

It is really fresh when you turn on the gas to heat up the large pot of water on the stove, then walk down to the pier and ask Blaine to pull on the rope of the lobster trap and lift the live lobsters out of the cold ocean water, choose your lobsters, make your purchase, and then carry the bag the three-minute walk back to the house to the now boiling pot of water. I would say that’s fresh!

Those who grow up by the sea, whether in Boston, or in the fishing village of Port Clyde, Maine (the harbor of Blaine’s mooring for his boat at the end of the day), or San Francisco, or Miami, or Corpus Christi, know fresh seafood from day-old seafood, from, God-forbid, frozen seafood, as sure as we know the sights and smells of the changing tides.

And nothing compares to fresh seafood, or for that matter freshly baked bread, or freshly picked strawberries, or freshly grown herbs. *Is your mouth watering yet?*

I am going to the sea in a few weeks. I will most assuredly enjoy fresh seafood, but more important, I will enjoy far greater fruits of the sea. For I will begin a four-month sabbatical at the end of June after nearly 22 years of priesthood, nine of which I have served as your Executive Director.

The origins of this sabbatical came from a conversation two years ago in Ghana, Africa, when Duane Parker, past Executive Director of ACPE, made reference to his sabbatical in the middle of his tenure with his organization. Shortly thereafter I happened to be at a meeting with Roy Woodruff, the Executive Director of AAPC, and I asked him if he had been given any sabbatical leave while in his current position. And yes, after six years, his organization gave him a sabbatical. I then approached the National Leadership Council, who after research and discussion approved a sabbatical leave for myself. With the development of the NACC restructuring process, I postponed the sabbatical once and offered to do so again. The new Board of Directors, however, during their February 17–18, 2001, meeting, encouraged me to move ahead with the planned sabbatical this July through October.

Actually, I think this is a good time for my sabbatical in the life of the association. The summer months are a slower paced time at the
national office. The restructuring is completed and the transition seems to be going as smoothly as these things go. There will still be adjustments, and we will make them in our ongoing evaluation process.

More important, I believe my absence will be beneficial to our new directors, Susanne Chawleszczewski and Michele Sakurai, as they establish themselves and their roles on the leadership team of the association. As much as I consciously want to let go of two critical areas of direct responsibility in the NACC, old habits are hard to break even with good awareness. My sabbatical leave gives the directors and myself the needed transition space.

I believe we have succeeded in providing the directors a good orientation period; we have completed strategic planning for the next year, established clear communication and reporting processes, and have the advantage of a stable and experienced support staff that can assist them in their work.

I have designated Kathy Eldridge, Manager of Operations for the NACC, as the person-in-charge during the time I am away. Many of you know Kathy and the outstanding level of knowledge and competence that she has brought to this association over the last 17 years. I have worked with Kathy in close collaboration in nearly every area of association business, and I have unwavering confidence in her ability to take this leadership responsibility while I am away.

Also, I am a firm believer that none of us is indispensable. I have done my best to responsibly put the pieces in place for a smooth interim and I am confident that the NACC will receive the greatest benefit in having the return of its Executive Director fresh from the sea!

I am indeed going to the sea. I begin my sabbatical with a long-time dream: a 30-day retreat at the Jesuit Eastern Point Retreat House in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Over the last 20 years I have regularly made my eight-day retreat in this beautiful setting 30 miles north of Boston.

It sounds idyllic—and it certainly is a wonderful graced opportunity—but the Ignatian retreat is hard work! I just finished reading the Spiritual Exercises, and Ignatius talks about six one-hour mediation periods each day! With a mischievous smirk I have told my friends that obviously Ignatius has never been to Gloucester in July (read “prime beach time”).

You can imagine explaining this phenomenon of a 30-day silent
retreat to family and friends not familiar with retreats, spiritual
direction, etc. The best line I got from one person to whom I tried to
de-mythologize the “horror” of what I was proposing to do was,
“Well, I would hate to be the first person to meet you after it was
over!”

Following the retreat, I will take some vacation time with family and
friends and then begin the second phase of my sabbatical: the writing
of my book. I had a preliminary arrangement with a publisher for a
book on spirituality and medicine seven years ago at a time when I
foolishly believed that I could write in my “spare” time. During that
phase of diminishing spare time, however, I did have the opportunity
to test out, refine, and refocus the purpose and content of my work.

The title of the proposed book is *The Unread Vital Sign:*
*Spirituality in the Practice of Medicine.* The intended audience is
the allied health care professionals on the team: physicians, nurses,
social workers, administrators, etc. Much of the work comes from
my speaking and writing these last many years, especially out of the
Harvard Medical School, Mind/Body Institute, *Spirituality and
Healing in Medicine.*

I hope and trust this will be a worthwhile contribution to our
profession. I certainly have had some wonderful opportunities to test
out the theory through many talks which have provoked challenges,
enabled clarifications, and induced excitement about what it is we do,
why we do it, how we do it, and how it is essential to the practice of
medicine. During the next few weeks I will seek to reestablish an
agreement with a publisher.

Most important, this sabbatical leave will be a unique opportunity to
take some time out and reflect upon where I have come from
personally and professionally, and where God is leading me in the
days ahead in my life and ministry. I still have lots of energy around
leadership in NACC, especially with firming up the new structure and
with ongoing collaboration efforts with other professionals, both
within and outside of professional spiritual care.

I love Milwaukee, especially the warmth and friendliness of the
people, and likewise the revitalized downtown, the ethnic festivals
every weekend of the summer, the excellent theater, ballet,
symphony, and free outdoor concerts. *But I miss the ocean. My
Midwest friends quickly retort, “But you have the lake!” Well, yes,
but really no. When I walk along the lakeshore and take that deep
breath—I stop, terribly disappointed. My lungs hunger for that salt in
the air.*
So I leave for sabbatical to go home to the salt water and enjoy the fruits of the sea. In fact, I will be staying in a house just a three-minute walk from Blaine’s dock. Though I may boil water for tea each day as I awake to begin my writing, there will also be a few nights during that stay when the pot will be bigger, and the boiling will take longer—long enough for me to walk down the road, choose my lobster, and get back to enjoy some fresh seafood. ✷